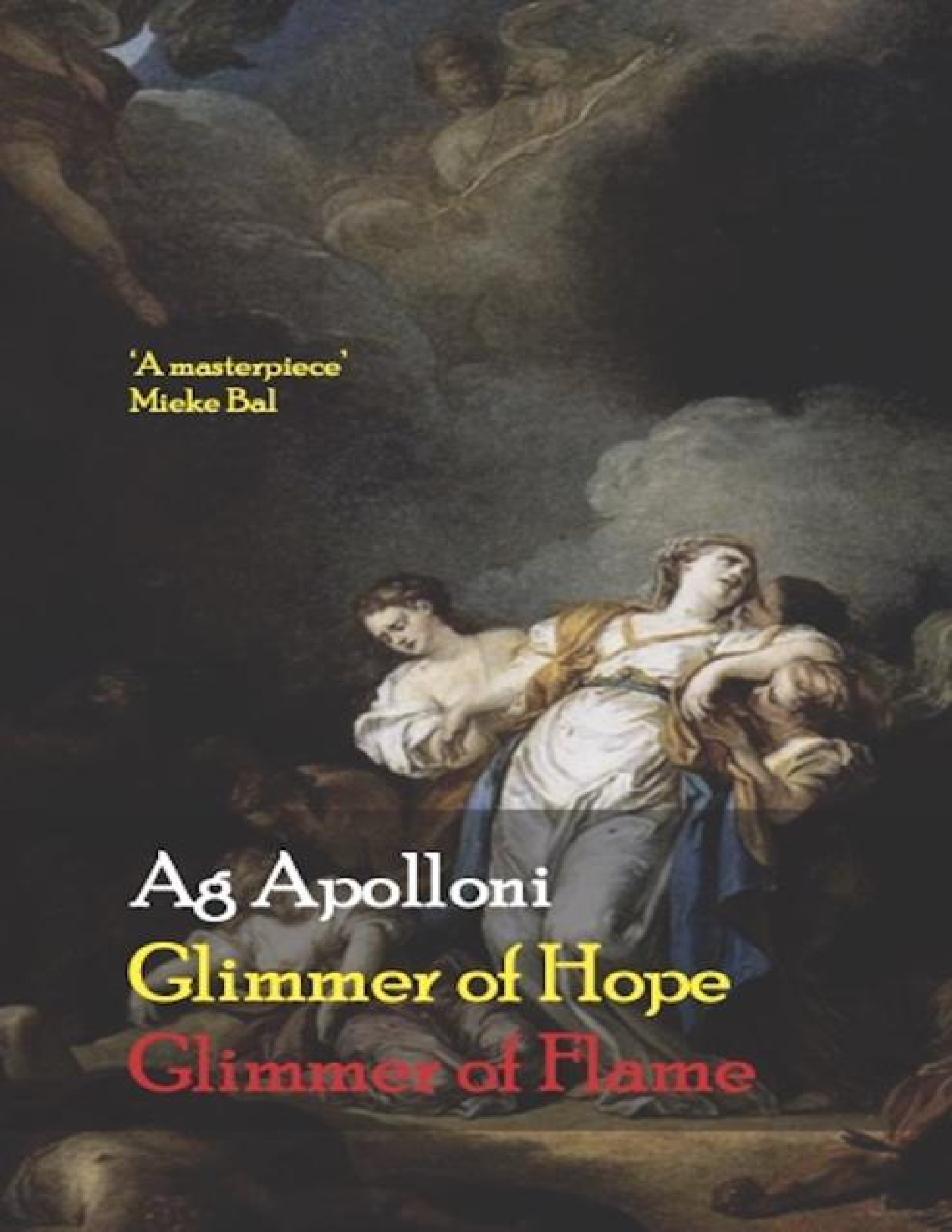
'A masterpiece'
Mieke Bal
Ag Apolloni
Glimmer of Hope
Glimmer of Flame

Glimmer of Hope, Glimmer of Flame

a documentary novel

Ag Apolloni

translated from the Albanian by Robert Wilton

OceanofPDF.com

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This work takes widely-attested historical events
and re-presents them in novelized form for the purposes of artistic effect.
The representation of history and of individuals should be read in this light.

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Seated on their tomb
she made lament over her dead children.

Aeschylus, *Niobe* (lost play)

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THE SOFT SNOW is melting on the pavement edges. It's a Saturday, in the first week of April 2019. Dritan and I meet at the Mother Teresa Cathedral as agreed, and we wait for Gazi. Just as the bells are ringing ten, his car appears beside us. We get in and we set off down the boulevard, three stubbly disciples. A bit farther on I look back for some reason, and over my left shoulder I see bronze Bill Clinton raising his hand, as if to wish us bon voyage. Although the wheels are taking us out of the capital, the wheels in my mental machinery are spinning backwards, taking me back to Tophane, up to the first floor, to *my* apartment (not sure if a renter is allowed to use the possessive pronoun), to the study, where a mess of papers are still waiting for me on the table and on the couch, my jottings, and words and phrases and fragments from the lost works of Aeschylus, and various scholarly summaries about him. He's lost so much! Such a tragedy for a tragedian. And here's me, choosing to become not a creator of literature but a restorer – like last year, with a lost manuscript of Marlowe. Having written a play based only on a sheet of theatre accounts, why not write another one now when I've only got the subject and a few fragments? In the end, art – like an aching soul – is born of absences. At one time, poets made an aesthetic movement out of truncated torsos – the aesthetics of absence; they venerated ancient statues, not for what they were but for what they lacked, because what time had failed to preserve the imagination supplied, and one couldn't be sure what hurt more, what was left or what was lost.

For a few years now I've been fascinated by lost and fragmentary works. Of all the losers, for me the most tragic is the father of tragedy: he wrote something like a hundred works, eighty of which we know by name alone, and only seven of which have survived (that's a conditional seven, since *Agamemnon*, *Choephori* and *The Eumenides* really form one trilogy, the eponymous *Oresteia*), or perhaps five (that's a conditional five, since we're not sure if *Prometheus Bound* is really by him, and if it is, it's not complete anyway, being in fact just the first part of a lost trilogy; *The Suppliants*, meanwhile, is reckoned to be only the first part of a lost tetralogy about the

Danaids, like *The Persians*, which is the second part of a lost trilogy, or *Seven Against Thebes*, which is the third part of a lost trilogy), or in truth only fragments (in Classical Greek drama, a work was only considered complete if it was a tetralogy, meaning that none of his surviving works is complete: the *Oresteia* is missing the satirical piece *Proteus*; the *Prometheia* is missing *Prometheus Unbound* and *Prometheus the Fire-Bearer* and its satire; the Danaid tetralogy is missing *The Egyptians*, *The Daughters of Danaus* and the satire *Amymone*; the tetralogy of which we only have *The Persians* is missing *Phineus*, *Glaucus* and the satire *Prometheus the Fire-Kindler*; and the *Oedipodea* – of which we only have *Seven Against Thebes* – has lost *Laius* and *Oedipus* and its satire, *Sphinx*), or perhaps just one fragment, and usually not a single scrap.

The works are lost, but the author remains. The most wonderful and the most woeful, tragediographic and tragic.

As someone fixated on losses, accordingly, when I went to Greece it was unthinkable that I wouldn't visit Eleusis; there, among the ancient ruins – where Aeschylus had once practised his sacred rites, and worked his magic and created his *Goat-Songs* – I naturally didn't find any of his plays, but I did see a cave with a sign that stopped me in my tracks: *Entry to Hell*. A gateway through which, according to the Ancient Greeks, sooner or later we must all pass (paradise, somewhere up on high, not having been invented at that point). So: there was hell, right in front of me. And there was I, right in front of hell. Here the few, there the many. Here the light, there the darkness. Hell was said to contain three mysteries: the unknown, loss and death. It was the limit of Zeus' dominion, and the beginning of Hades'.

Transfixed at the mouth of darkness, in that sun-seared noon, I was struck by how unsettled I felt. All those works by Aeschylus – dark places in literature – surely belonged to the dark side of this world. I began to recite those lost titles and fragments: *Nereids, The Danaids, Women of Salamis, The Cretan Women, The Phrygian Women, The Thracian Women, The Daughters of Phorcys, The Daughters of Helios, Iphigenia, Penelope, The Priestesses, The Nurses of Dionysus, Hypsipyle, Niobe* and who knows how many other dramas of human, heavenly and mythical beings, dramas that in the best cases have survived as fragments, and in most cases only titles, and in the worst cases have vanished without trace.

The one that had really caught my attention was named, as usual, for its protagonist: *Niobe*. Only a few lines of it have been left to us. Having tried

to get a feel for its poetics from the fragments and commentaries, I'd put on paper the theory that it was a companion piece to *Prometheus Bound*. Prometheus was punished by being bound to a stone; she was punished by being turned to stone. Both their cases were linked to Olympus. But *Niobe* would surely have been more moving for the audience: a feminine tragedy, a woman, a mother, whose tears had touched even Zeus' heart.

So Aeschylus seemed to me the best and the darkest of the ancient dramatists, and *Niobe* seemed to me the most painful of his plays. For better or for worse, that pain remained forever in darkness; lost. I guess the earth, like the moon, has its dark side.

It was August, and the sun was scorching me like the flames of hell while I was gazing at the entrance to hell. When I'd visited Olympus I'd realized the wrath of those whose idea of mercy – something that ought to be soft – was to turn people into something hard. When I'd seen Parnassus, I didn't see Apollo the Musagetes; perhaps he was feeling guilty or embarrassed at the pain he'd caused Niobe. When I'd been in Athens, looking at the Areopagus – where they'd tried to get Aeschylus killed – and the theatre below the Parthenon, where they'd performed some of those plays that are now lost, I'd been seized by a nostalgia for what we'll never see. Further down, at Aristotle's Lyceum, I recalled his line in the *Poetics*, which we still have, about a play which we don't: *all who have dramatized the whole tale of Niobe, and not a part of her story, like Aeschylus, either fail utterly or meet with poor success on the stage*. (And how am I supposed to know how Aeschylus dramatized it, when his work is lost?) When I looked for the answer in Eleusis, where the dramatist performed his sacred rituals, his magic tricks and his artistic spectacles, all I found were ruins and a few torsos; in Florence, in the Uffizi Gallery, I found Niobe in alabaster with all her Niobids; at the Louvre in Paris Niobe's tragedy appeared to me on a Greek vase.

But I wanted manuscript – to show me a more vivid, living Niobe. The totality of my knowledge is very small. The title, as usual with the plays of Aeschylus, is an eponym: *Niobe*. The play is part of a trilogy of transformation myths: *Callisto* (turned into a bear) *Atalanta* (turned into a lioness) and *Niobe* (turned into stone). The setting: Thebes. So Aeschylus didn't bring his protagonist to Lydia. The ending would be implied, or told by someone, but not shown to the public. Today, from the fragments that remain, we can only be sure of two characters: Niobe and Tantalus. In the

third fragment – the last – we know that Niobe is sitting at the graves of her children and her husband. From this whole drama, telling of a mother of seven boys and seven girls, only seven lines remain to us; and those aren't the original manuscript, but other people's quotes referring to the manuscript. Those phrases – discovered and translated into English by an American scholar – really aren't sufficient to give us a clear idea of how the play might have been in its entirety. These are the lines: *1. Maidens such as these Ister and pure Phasis claim to breed; 2. God planteth in mortal men the cause of sin whensoever he wills utterly to destroy a house; 3. Seated on their tomb she made lament over her dead children. 4. I sow a field twelve days' journey wide, even the Berecynthian land, where Adrastea's seat and Ida resound with lowing oxen and bleating sheep, and the whole plain roars; 5. My fate, that dwelt aloft in Heaven, now falleth to earth and saith to me "Learn not to esteem human things overmuch"; 6. For, alone of gods, Death loves not gifts; no, not by sacrifice, nor by libation canst thou aught avail with him; he hath no altar nor hath he hymn of praise, from him, alone of gods, Persuasion stands aloof; 7. The kindred of the gods, men near to Zeus, whose is the altar of Zeus, their sire, high in clear air on Ida's hill, and in their veins not yet hath ceased to flow the blood divine.*

In the first fragment we see that two young women want to procreate. In the second, we're told that when God wants to destroy a family he can find a reason easily enough. In the third we understand that Niobe is sitting and mourning at the graves of her children. In the fourth we gather that 'someone' claims to have planted a vast area of land including that of the Mountain Mother (Berecynthia), where Zeus' nurses Adrasteia and Ida have stopped to rest. In the fifth we find the moral of the story. In the sixth we understand that death's the only thing you can't curry favour with. And in the seventh, as through fog, we perceive certain people through whom the blood of the gods still flows.

A stop at the traffic lights is enough to bring my mind back into my body, sitting in the back seat of the car and silent, while in the front seats my two friends who planned this trip are chatting.

It had been the last Tuesday in March, and I'd just got up and washed and been getting ready to go to work when my phone chirruped. I found it and answered.

A few minutes later I was sitting in Café Z opposite my friend Dritan, watching him stir his coffee. I prodded him to make it quick, as time was

getting tight for my lectures.

‘Tomorrow’s the 27th of March’, he said, stirring the coffee.

‘I know; thanks.’

‘It’s the date when they took Ferdonija’s four sons and her husband.’

‘Ah.’

He told me that he’d written something about the case, that the piece was going to be published in English and Serbian, and also that a friend of his – Gazi – had made a documentary about the woman. Still without any great interest on my part, he said he’d send me both: the article and the film. And he added that tomorrow it would be twenty years since her husband and children had been taken away from her; and still they’d only found the bodies of two of the boys, so three graves remained empty. The most prominent bit of his friend’s documentary was a scene at the graves, for him the most moving and significant aspect. He said that in a few days’ time he was going to Gjakova with this friend of his, to meet the woman and give her the fee he’d been paid for the article. He asked if I wanted to go with them. Based on what he’d said, and the invitation, I felt like I too was being prompted to write something about the *case*. So I asked him something which had been on my mind, perhaps rather absurd: what was she up to now? He looked at me as though that was the last thing he’d have expected me to ask, and shrugged. He said she had nothing to do, poor woman; just sit and lament… suffer… wait… Hmm. Sit and lament. That isn’t much of a theme, I said to myself. I left, without having said whether I’d go with them or not.

While I was walking I was thinking: sit and lament. When I got to the office I was thinking: sit and lament. On the way to the lecture room I was thinking: how can you write something about someone who just sits and laments their own fate? I thus convinced myself that there are some things you simply can’t write about. Sit and lament. I got to the lecture room. I jotted some words on the board: character, archetype, myth… Sit and lament. Suddenly it came back to me. Sit and lament. Eureka! I’d found it. I’d found the lost tragedy.

I left the room again and took out my phone. I’m coming with you, I said to my friend. I was convinced that a lost tragedy and a tragedy of loss are the same thing.

And so now here we are, the three of us in the car, Gazi driving. Dritan’s chatting to him, while I sit in the back and listen to jazz music and blues

conversation. The jazz, which Gazi seems to have acquired a taste for, passed on or inspired by his musician brother, makes us travel in slow motion. The conversation starts as a complaint about the impossibility of life in this country – where, according to them, theft is dominant, crime is courage and every kind of dirty dealing is seen as virtue. Perhaps Europe needs Kosova as its hell.

Thus we pass from war to peace. Then from peace to war. More than a conversation, it seems to me like an interview, with the passenger asking a question and the driver answering him, while sometimes I listen and sometimes I remember the war.

I'm sixteen. The city is full of tanks, armoured cars and soldiers. You can hear machine gun fire and mortars. My mother's talking on the telephone. *We've no way to get out, they've got the whole of Kosova surrounded*, she replies to my father's insistent voice. I imagine my father on the other end of the line that morning, in a phone box by the side of the road, his bicycle propped up against it; I imagine him hanging up, coming out of the phone box, raising his eyes to heaven and praying. Maybe. He sees clouds far up in the sky. He hops on his bike and continues his daily round – some light work he found after he came out of hospital, after the operation: delivering newspapers. His feet work the pedals, and his hands fling the papers to thump against the doors and windows of those German homes, so they might be roused, might react, might save his family, might save Kosova. The wheels turn, the newspapers fly, and Germans in their pyjamas emerge trembling because someone's attacking the house and they don't understand what's up with the Gastarbeiter who races his bicycle and yells like a lunatic: *Krieg im Kosovo! Krieg im Kosovo! Krieg im Kosovo! Rettet meine Kinder! Rettet meine Kinder!* And away he goes, working the pedals as though the gears aren't just to move the bike, but to get the whole world moving.

The killings, the massacres, have been going on since before dawn. People are getting out of town if they can. Some of our soldiers come bursting through the yard, set on getting to the mountains. My mum asks them where they're going in such a hurry and whether we should get out too. One of them with a Kalash turns back to her and says: they're only chasing us soldiers; you stay. When we see that the ones with guns are running away, we panic. Mum says we should go. But where? My uncle has begged us to come and stay with him, in his village, but we don't want to

leave our home. Now though, after what our bashibazouk soldier has said, mother hurries inside, fills a few bags with clothes and tells us that we're getting out, because those people can't protect us and the criminals are no friends of ours and we're not just going to sit there and wait for them. So just like that we set off, fast as we can. My uncle's delighted to see us. The next morning he sees us on our way over into Macedonia, together with his family. He doesn't come himself; he stops at the bridge on the edge of the village, even though we're begging him to come. But he's got his chickens to look after, the cows, the house… Someone should stay and keep an eye, he says. As the ground starts to rise and we climb, I keep looking back and I see him watching us. We walk, all day we walk, through the mountains and it's after midnight when we cross the border. We've been in Tetovo a few weeks when we hear that they've killed my uncle. Someone says they shot him; someone else says they tied him to an oak tree and set fire to him; a third says they caught him and butchered him. We never learned the truth; but at the end of the war when they brought my uncle's body down from the hill to be buried in the village, his coffin was so light and went crunk-crunk as if there were only a handful of bones inside. They who burned homes, villages, towns – who killed children, women and old people – why would they have spared him?

I've always wondered how my father dealt with the loss of his brother. Over there in Hamburg he had no way at all of knowing what had happened to him. He got the news of his death only after we'd got back home. In his first call with my mother, he asked how we were, how his brother's family were, and of course how his brother was. At the first question mother answered *fine*, at the second question she answered the same, and at the third question she fell silent. After a moment she said that he needed to be strong, because his brother was no more. Not a word came down the wire, no reply. Mother was going *hallo, hallo?*, to see if he was still on the line, but not a word. She was about to hang up when he asked how they'd killed him. Then mother gave him the version they'd told us, how, after he'd observed that the enemy were advancing day by day, he'd at last decided to get away from the house and the village, and he'd climbed into the hills, in the same direction we'd gone, but further up in the higher part of Stagova they'd caught him and… she didn't give him any more details. *The rest is silence*. Standing by my mother, I got the idea that – while staying silent – my father was crying. (I know it, because in the worst situations I've done

the same, cried silently.) Remembering the stories he'd told us of his own childhood, I knew that he was now recalling the time when they were little, orphaned, running through the meadows, and his brother hopped up into a tree to eat an apple while he, being much smaller and unable to climb up, could only hug the trunk. On that occasion his brother had returned to earth with an armful of apples and they'd eaten them together, backs slumped against the trunk; and like that, I'm sure, he hangs up, sits slumped in the phone box and cries, with no hand to come around his shoulder and give him strength.

From then on, whenever people I've known and grown up with have been killed, I get the strangest feeling: how is it possible that they're dead and I'm alive? Isn't it really the other way round: I'm dead and they're alive? Perhaps a person simply isn't aware that they've died and carries on as if alive. Perhaps he up on high simulates a familiar life for me, until one day he decides to inform me that in fact I died in 1999, and everyone I thought has died is actually still living. Maybe it's crazy, but I often consider it as a possibility. Which of us is alive? God knows.

I often lapse into a state like that – all foggy and numb, utterly oblivious to the reality around me, and I can't be sure if it's reality or illusion. And I'm not calm either.

There's a trick to being calm: I mention it because I've just remembered something I was told by my mother's uncle, who married a Serb. He'd lived the other side of the Stone Bridge in Skopje, which served as the connection between two sides who *from ancient grudge break to new mutiny*. And because disturbances between the two sides were not uncommon, he was always getting caught up in them, and this made things difficult for him at work and at home, until one day in his office an elderly colleague of his had declared that he'd discovered the secret of calmness. Having announced that, he'd opened a drawer and taken out a kind of small cube, with three versions of a person's face on its various sides: in the first they'd covered their ears; in the second they'd covered their eyes; in the third they'd covered their mouth. My uncle had turned the cube over in his hands, asking what it meant. His colleague replied: 'Whenever someone comes into the office and asks me about some scandal or abuse – whether I've seen it or heard it – I take the cube in my hands and I find peace. It's as if I've seen nothing, as if I've heard nothing, as if I've nothing to say. There: that's my secret. You're young', he said to my great-uncle, 'and you really ought

to pay attention to this lesson, if you're planning to get old without getting crazy.'

Remarkably, from that moment on my great-uncle was changed. When he was among the people beyond the stone bridge, it was as if he didn't hear the abuses and insults they directed at Albanians; and on his own side of the bridge he showed himself equally indifferent to the abuses and insults going the other way. When he got home he'd talk to his wife about anything, but he kept silent about politics. He'd seen nothing, he'd heard nothing, and so he'd nothing to say. And he grew older in that fashion, never getting wound up by anyone, a happy man thanks to his indifference to both sides.

He told me the story, one day when he came to the house where we were living as refugees. He didn't mention the war, or anything about conflict; he just asked us if we were well, if we had enough to eat and drink – and then he told us the secret of his calm, while we were watching the refugees on television.

At the same moment, but on the other side of the Atlantic, a contemporary of his was seeing exactly the same images but thinking very differently. He'd not eaten supper for several days. Supper didn't feel right with the news, he said. How could you eat comfortably, watching columns of hungry refugees fleeing their homes on television? He was remembering the times when the world had said nothing. *My father was crying*, he had written. *It was the first time I saw him cry. I had never thought it possible. As for my mother, she was walking, her face a mask, without a word, deep in thought. I looked at my little sister, Tzipora, her blond hair neatly combed, her red coat over her arm: a little girl of seven. On her back a bag too heavy for her. She was clenching her teeth; she already knew it was useless to complain. Here and there, the police were lashing out with their clubs: 'Faster!'*

You had to give up one of them: the supper or the news. He could avoid the news and eat his supper in peace, but what would he say to his dear father, when one day they met up again? That he'd shut his eyes and his ears and his mouth, just like when his father in his agony had called his name?

On the television he sees a valley full of people, a child holding up a cardboard box with *Help* written on it, then dozens of hands reaching out for a loaf, from some unseen person holding it on the other side of the

wires. A memory sparks: *In the wagon which had brought the bread, a battle had ensued. Men were hurling themselves on each other, trampling, tearing at and mauling each other. Beasts of prey unleashed, animal hate in their eyes. An extraordinary vitality possessed them, sharpening their teeth and nails.* Then he remembers the wagon he was once in: how sons crushed fathers to snatch the bread. The screen shows men, women, children wrapped in blankets. *Snow was falling heavily. We were forbidden to sit down or to move. A thick layer of snow was accumulating on our blankets. We were given bread, the usual ration. We threw ourselves on it. Someone had the idea of quenching his thirst by eating snow. Soon, we were all imitating him. As we were not permitted to bend down, we took out our spoons and ate the snow off our neighbours' backs. A mouthful of bread and a spoonful of snow.*

The SS men who were watching were greatly amused by the spectacle.

Supper’s finished; for him it had finished as soon as the news came on. The news has finished, except that he knows the tragedy lasts longer than the TV bulletin, longer than one passage of the sun. His wife and son are sorry to see him like this, because they know what the pictures remind him of.

He watches the news like this every day, disturbed, and he celebrates when he learns that – at last – NATO is intervening. Some people – certain intellectuals – are against it, feeling that America shouldn’t get mixed up in other people’s business; it’s got enough mess of its own to sort out. The Holocaust survivor watches these intellectuals and members of the public, and he can’t believe his eyes or his ears. He remembers when Roosevelt, not wanting to get mixed up in foreign affairs, turned back a boat carrying one thousand Jews, who’d struggled to reach his shores and saw him as their saviour, he who at the last minute turned his back on them. *I don't understand. Roosevelt was a good man, with a heart. He understood those who needed help. Why didn't he allow those refugees to disembark? A thousand people – in America, the great country, the greatest democracy, the most generous of all new nations in modern history. What happened? I don't understand. Why the indifference, at the highest level, to the suffering of the victims?*

Dring-dring! goes the telephone. It’s the White House, to ask him if he’ll go and speak against the perils of indifference.

A little later he finds himself in his study, writing: *What is indifference? Etymologically, the word means "no difference." A strange and unnatural state in which the lines blur between light and darkness, dusk and dawn, crime and punishment, cruelty and compassion, good and evil.* He looks at the clock, then writes, deletes, adds: *good things have also happened in this traumatic century: the defeat of Nazism, the collapse of communism, the rebirth of Israel on its ancestral soil...*

Running through his mind: burying the clock in the garden, being deported by train, separation from his mother and sister, children hanged in nooses, the dead man frozen to his violin, transfer to Buchenwald, being counted, having heads shaved, the killing of his father… pictures of the lines of people entering the gas chambers, the chimneys of the ovens and now… President Clinton's invitation to give a lecture at the White House, where a few days earlier he'd taken the decision to intervene militarily in the Balkans, to save Kosova from ethnic cleansing and genocide. When he'd been a child in Buchenwald concentration camp, Kosova was part of Albania and they had sheltered and protected whole families of Jews. Those Albanian families had given their word, when the world was silent. All this was in his mind, and so he was pleased that the current President was not turning his back on victims.

His hand continued to write: ... *And then, of course, the joint decision of the United States and NATO to intervene in Kosovo and save those victims, those refugees, those uprooted by a man whom I believe should, because of his crimes, be charged with crimes against humanity. This time, the world was not silent.*

He remembers the day of liberation, life resurgent, and then getting up at midnight and going back to the place where he was born to look for the buried clock. He sees himself entering the garden before dawn, and digging. The clock was where he'd left it; but his house no longer contained his father, or his mother, or his sister. He reburied the clock, because it was an old clock telling a different time.

He folds the page and his thoughts unfold: *Does it mean that we have learned from the past? Does it mean that society has changed? Has the human being become less indifferent and more human? Have we really learned from our experiences? Are we less insensitive to the plight of victims of ethnic cleansing and other forms of injustices in places near and far? Is today's justified intervention in Kosovo, led by you, Mr. President, a*

lasting warning that never again will the deportation, the terrorization of children and their parents, be allowed anywhere in the world? Will it discourage other dictators in other lands from doing the same?

In the East Room of the White House, between President Clinton and First Lady Hillary and before a select audience, the Jewish Writer closes his speech with the words: *And so, once again, I think of the young Jewish boy from the Carpathian Mountains. He has accompanied the old man I have become throughout these years of quest and struggle. And together we walk towards the new millennium, carried by profound fear and extraordinary hope.*

His soft voice, like a Rabbi reading the Talmud, has entered their ears and pierced their hearts.

Silence. Then applause.

As they're leaving the East Room, the President waits for the Writer to clutch his arm again, just as he'd done in a meeting a few years before when, inflamed by what he'd seen in Bosnia, he urged: 'Do something, Mr President!'

Now the President is watching the same man again, voice trembling at what's happening in Kosova. Seeing how badly he's been affected by the previous evening's news, with its pictures of massacres and Albanian refugees, the President stands close to him and says quietly:

'Why don't you go there?'

The Writer lifts his head, looks into the intent face of the President and realizes that he's serious.

'If I can do something, I will go', he replies.

'Of course you can', insists the President.

When he finds himself in the plane, above the white clouds which give the impression of paradise and of peace, the Nobel Peace laureate understands that he's travelling not only through space, but also through time. He's travelling not only from America to the Balkans, but from the Second World War to the Kosova War.

When he climbs down from the heavens and is swamped by Albanian refugees, he understands that this is the longest journey of his life, down a road fifty-four years long, from the day he left the extermination camp to the moment when he now approaches the displacement camp.

Because of the similarities between the persecutions, the President had asked him to visit the camps of the Albanians, to report on the state of the

refugees. Go, look, listen and speak to them! The Buchenwald survivor remembers the President's words as he walks among the children of Čegrane camp on Children's Day. It's one of the largest camps in Macedonia, with more than fifty thousand refugees, some forty percent of whom are children.

Thousands of young children took part in the event. Organized by UNICEF and other aid organizations at the Čegrane *camp, it was a chance for these ethnic Albanian children to have a bit of fun. Face painting was one of the more popular activities put on for the day. The refugee children also joined together in singing traditional Albanian songs. A special envoy sent by U.S. President Bill Clinton to the Balkans, a Holocaust survivor, declared that he was deeply moved by what he'd seen in the camp*, reported a journalist for Associated Press.

The Writer is seen walking among the children, his hands resting on the shoulders of two of them. He walks and talks:

'So here I am to see the children; they break my heart.'

The journalist asks him: 'Have you been talking to people as you go around the camp?'

He replies: 'Not the adults yet. For the moment I'm speaking to children; I love children. And to see the innocence of these children being assaulted, being besieged, being oppressed like…'

Another clip shows a child singing *O Kosova, o cradle of freedom…* and another reciting a poem about Adem Jashari, while the Writer looks on benevolently and listens to the interpreter.

In the next sequence he talks about the Serbian leader:

'Milošević is a man who wants to rule, even if it means ruling over a cemetery. He is a lunatic.'

And he continues wandering through the camps, in Macedonia and Albania. Looking at the children, one of his companions says:

'They seem happy enough; look how they're laughing. They don't seem to be traumatized.'

'Children live in the now more than we do. They're laughing now, they're fitting in with the party spirit, but tomorrow they'll remember what they've seen, how they were exiled; and that will leave its mark. They need therapists, and we should provide them, because the trauma will come when the party's over.'

'Why is Milošević doing this to them?'

‘Because he wants to make history.’

‘Will he succeed?’

‘Oh yes. He’ll make history as a criminal.’

A journalist from the *New Yorker* writes about the Jewish humanist’s visit to the camps and the Albanian refugees. He notes that *administration officials said the visit was meant to focus attention on the moral argument that they say underpins NATO's bombing campaign against Yugoslavia.*

Of the four major American television networks, only CNN covered the Holocaust survivor’s visit, and American officials said fading interest in the Kosovo story is complicating their efforts to build a strong public consensus on military action.

‘People have lost focus on why we’re doing what we are doing’, says a spokesman for the United States Embassy. Asked by the reporter why they’d picked the Nobel Peace laureate in particular to send among the refugees, he replies: *You need a person like him to keep your moral philosophy on track.*

‘I’ve learned something from my experiences as a contemporary of so many events’, the Writer tells the American reporter; ‘When evil shows its face, you don't wait, you don't let it gain strength. You must intervene.’

Walking through the camp he remembers the Nazi camps, and then he remembers the figures frozen in the snow, and after three hours in the scorching sun he makes a surprising and insistent request on behalf of the Kosovan refugees:

‘We must not allow winter to set in here.’

As soon as those words are uttered, the pace quickens to understand the truth, to document the crimes, and to hasten the end of the war. He goes from one camp to another, listening to the stories and asking questions. Watching a man putting a child to bed, he asks:

‘Do you tell them stories?’

‘Yeah.’

‘What kind of stories?’

‘Stories about home.’

Later he stops a sixteen-year-old girl.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Bahrije.’

‘Tell me, what do you think of when you wake up in the morning?’

‘That I will go home.’

He walks on, and stops another refugee.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Besim.’

‘What do you think of human beings who do this?’

‘No one with a soul could do such a thing.’

At some point the journalist who’s accompanying him asks the Writer:

‘What do you think about the American intervention?’

The Writer looks out on the camp of refugees, and he bites his lip as he feels their suffering; the bright sun makes him squint.

‘For Americans, Kosovo is a moral war. We’ve nothing to gain in Kosovo, but if we didn’t intervene we’d lose a great deal morally.’

As the special envoy of the American President, feeling the pain of the refugees like some saint in modern dress, he wanders from one camp to another, in Macedonia and Albania, wherever Kosova’s Albanians have been expelled, giving heart, giving hope. From this camp he constructs *his view of the human face of war*.

‘Just me and my son are left of…’ a mother starts to say to him one day, and the words become tears before she’s finished speaking. When the Writer sees her young son, he picks him up, holds him against his chest, strokes his head. He approaches an old man, in the traditional felt hat of the Albanians, and he asks him if his family escaped. The old man doesn’t want to speak, but when he realizes it’s an American he says:

‘180 men were shot. Two men survived. I am one of the two.’

The Writer puts a hand on his shoulder, trying to suggest that even amid the bitterest fate there is some good fortune, but the old man swallows and adds:

‘My son was among the others.’

The old man’s tears come in a torrent. The Writer bites his lip again, but he can’t stifle the reddening of his own eyes and the moisture that blurs his vision. He shakes the old man’s hand. From the medical perspective he knows that if the other person is suffering, the doctor shouldn’t let himself suffer too, because that helps no one. But from the moral, human perspective he knows that patient and doctor must share the pain between them, and so make it more bearable. What does it mean to feel nothing? It means you’re dead. If I don’t feel your pain, I don’t feel my own, he thinks, and continues his tramp from one tent to the next.

‘I don’t know who you are, but if you’re American you’re a good person’, one man says to him.

The Writer laughs deeply, and he goes on shaking the hands of the older ones, resting a hand on the shoulders of the men, smiling at the women, stroking the heads of the children, and when in the evening he’s alone in his room and he turns out the light and the memories begin to glimmer, no one else could imagine what a survivor of the Nazi camps feels after a whole day wandering through these camps. He can’t be sure whether he’s more affected by the image of the unhappy child he saw today, or by the unhappy child he himself once was; by the present plight of Albanian families, or the former plight of Jewish families. Or perhaps two sad children, two persecuted nations, two insane wars, two types of camp, are melting in his mind and becoming one.

The next day, sitting in front of a tent, he sees a middle-aged man smoking a cigarette and buried in thought.

‘What do you think?’ he asks.

‘It doesn’t matter what I think, but what America thinks.’

‘When will you go back?’

‘Well, it all depends on God… and on Clinton.’

The Writer smiles and claps him on the back.

‘They tore my two sons out of my hands, and I don’t know where they’ve taken them’, says a mother who can’t stop crying.

The Writer sits and listens to her story. He reads the signs of suffering before he hears the translation: the streaming tears and the trembling voice. He knows that the final glimpse is forever, and he contemplates how hard it’s going to be for this woman to live her whole life with such a memory.

When she hears that he’s an American, another woman comes up to him and asks:

‘Why does it happen to us? What did we do? What did we do to deserve this?’

The Writer gazes at her, sympathetic, and says:

‘I know you’re innocent. And I don’t know why you suffer. What I know is that I must be here at least. I must be. I cannot suffer in your place, but I have to be present at your suffering. That’s all I can do.’

One of his escorts asks the Writer:

‘What message are you trying to give by collecting these stories?’

‘I want to give hope to these people, to tell them that the victims are never alone.’

‘But you were.’

‘Hm.’

‘Have you stopped to wonder why this ethnic cleansing is happening, this war?’

‘It’s all happening because Milošević wants a Greater Serbia. He wants to be – to enter history, his history, as the person who re-established Greater Serbia.’

‘Now he’s being bombed, he’s going to have to give up on that idea.’

‘And if he surrenders he’ll still be punished. The man is a criminal.’

‘They call him the Butcher of the Balkans…’

‘No, he’s not a butcher. Just as Eichmann wasn’t the butcher of Auschwitz.’

‘Pardon?’

‘Milošević and Eichmann – though you can never compare tragedies like these – are accountable people, not butchers. A butcher kills and never has to answer to anyone, whereas people like this can never escape being held to account. We won’t and we can’t and we mustn’t let them.’

And the Jew walks on from camp to camp, like the high priest of Shiloh, determined in his compassion to shelter all of the children and raise them in the tabernacle. Just imagine him in ancient costume – and bearded, obviously – and then compare him with the painting by Jan Victors. Exactly the same look, the same emotion; only the clothes are different. *I love children; they break my heart*, he says, as continues tent by tent, camp by camp, to see, to listen, to touch, and to speak with them. Like this, he seems to have come down to earth with some messianic mission, to gather up our pains and take them as his own and bear them to the White House, to report: *In this haunted world of Kosovo refugees, adults wept. Children did not. They sang. They played games. They laughed. And I no longer know what hurt us more: the children's laughter or their parents' tears. As for their tormentors, you try to understand: how could human beings cause such agony to other human beings?* Shocked, he asks *Is this the lesson of our outgoing century: that it is human to be inhuman?* At last he asks himself*: Was my mission successful? I think it was meaningful…* And he closes with a word of hope*: Is there hope for Kosovars in the refugee*

camps? There was a sense of hope. It came from America and its allies. Our victory over Milošević's crimes remains their hope.

So wrote Elie Wiesel, one June night in Skopje. Thus he reported to the White House. A few days later NATO ground troops entered Kosova. One night later, in his *Letter to a Kosovar Friend*, he recalled his visit like this: *I visited you in your refugee camp. I met many of your friends and acquaintances, in Albania and Macedonia. Broken-hearted, I heard their stories of degradation and agony: I declare the bestial excesses of the Serbs to be intolerable. Often the victims would start to tell their story, voices subdued, and not be able to finish; they'd explode in sobbing. In the depths of my soul, in silence, my tears blended with theirs.*

That same night, when after his return from the camp the Writer was setting out his report, back in the big tent Dritan sat and laughed as he watched the film *Life is Beautiful*, the bit when the child says: *I didn't like the train,* and the father replies*: Me, neither. We'll take the bus back, okay?* and then, to the Nazis*: Did you hear that? We're taking the bus back!*

Dritan had also come by train, to Bllaca, and now he was hoping to return from the camp by bus.

The instability had got worse from the middle of March, and the ominous wave of evictions had caught up his family too. One morning his father had started the tractor, and his mother, his two sisters, his two brothers and he had all jumped on, after an emotional farewell to the dog. They'd set off along the road up the hill, among other tractors. It was wet, and muddy. Halfway up the road his father had climbed down from the tractor and told Dritan to drive. They'd begged him to stay with them, but no, he couldn't leave the house untended. They'd carried on towards the house of an uncle, eyes still fixed on their father as he grew ever smaller, and then became a dot on the horizon and at last vanished.

On the road they encountered people tramping with sacks, people on horseback, others on tractors – one had got stuck in the mud, and no one else had stopped to pull it out. Dritan had got down and hooked up the tractor to his and got it going. Now and then they'd stopped to pick up one of the walkers, until the tractor was full, and like that they went on until the road ran out for vehicles and they had to continue on foot.

That afternoon they'd reached his uncle's, where they'd immediately squeezed into the cellar, where there were something like thirty people. The

next morning, Dritan had woken early and set off alone; he'd found the tractor and gone back home to feed the dog, which leapt around joyfully at the sight of him. His father told him to let the dog loose to fend for itself, because there wasn't food enough even for them; but the dog wouldn't be parted from them.

After two days, Dritan was sharing his own food with the dog. The next day, when there wasn't any more bread, he'd found some eggs and scrambled them and eaten them with his father. Seeing the dog drooling, he rolled up his sleeves and got down a *tepsi* baking pan and threw in a bit of flour and – as well as he could remember – baked bread in the way his mother used to. He filled a pan with water and added it to the flour, he kneaded the dough, he put the tray in the oven. When the smell of charcoal reached his nostrils, he took out the bread and gave it to the dog; the dog didn't deign to eat it at first – perhaps because it was hot, or because it was burnt – but eventually tucked in. It had no alternative.

Why don't you bake one for us too? his father had asked him. *I only bake for those that don't complain*, Dritan had replied as he shared the bread with the dog. *Oh come on, I'm not picky either*, his father said. So Dritan had stuck his hands into the flour again. The dog wasn't too pernickety, but his father picked out a bit of crust here, a bit of inside there, cautiously distinguishing the baked bits from the burnt bits.

Because his father snored, Dritan couldn't sleep a wink. So they made a silent pact: his father slept at nights, he during the day. That way they could keep watch for each other too.

One night his father had slept badly, and so woke earlier than usual. He told his son to get some sleep, and he'd keep an eye out. But, however faithlessly, his eyelids had begun to droop again too, and they'd both slept heavily, like a pair of logs, and not even the tanks could wake them. A column of tanks had passed right by the house, shaking the building and the whole neighbourhood, and those two didn't hear a thing. Not the barking of the dog, not the tracks of the tanks. A few neighbours who were still in the village had knocked at the door and called out, but to no effect. No reply. It was only when they woke at midday and saw through the window the tanks on the hill that they realized they'd slept the sleep of the dead. His father had ordered Dritan to go back to his uncle's, and he himself would stay in the house or in the hills depending on how things were – and he'd take care of the dog. When they parted, the eyes of the animal met the eyes of the boy

and they each read a sadness in the other, a silent sorrow, a wordless pain, unweeping and unwoofing.

At his uncle's, everyone was living in the cellar, expecting to get bombed. When the NATO bombing had started, their hopes and their fears had risen. Hopes that the bombs falling from the sky would bring liberation, fears that the bombs would inflame their enemies to acts of revenge here on the ground. The still of the nights was broken by the thundering of the bombs and the barking of dogs. His uncle kept a window open, so that if a threat appeared in the doorway they'd have another way out. *And what if they come through the window?* Dritan had asked. At that his uncle – who hadn't thought of this – didn't reply, just got up and shut the window. If they come, they're welcome. Besides the house the family had nowhere else to go.

Actually, they did have somewhere else.

Where?

The ones who evicted them would explain.

When at last those ones came and rousted them out of their houses, things became clearer: there were going somewhere, but they only realized this as they walked away in a column, murmuring to one another. As they walked through Taslixhe to the Tokbahçe crossroads, they were ordered to throw away their papers, making a great mound of passports and identity cards, and thus they began their journey, at a trudge, without identity and without dignity, walking to the railway station through the rain. As they walked they were watched from all sides by militiamen and paramilitaries, and ahead of them there was only the endless column of their compatriots. The order they'd been given was definitive, like something from the Old Testament: Thou shalt not look back!

Now and then they'd hear an outburst behind them, or see in front of them someone being seized and pulled out of the column. Dritan was carrying his aunt's little daughter in his arms, and one of his brothers was pushing his granddad's wheelchair; the old man was paralyzed. As they walked they'd each stand on tip-toes occasionally, to see what was happening up ahead; and granddad, who also suffered from sclerosis, never let up asking where they were going and if they were nearly there.

The people in the column had one objective only: to get to the station. The column moved so slowly that, having set off from Taslixhe in the morning, they only reached the station in the evening. So a journey of three

kilometres or so took more than six hours. When he saw the train with all its carriages, and how the militia were shoving people to get them in, Dritan's blood boiled. Like in the films about the Holocaust, the militia were *helping* people into the train using force. There were already more than a hundred people in each carriage, and no one dared open a window. People were fighting for breath. The asthmatics stood with heads stretched up and mouths gaping like fish, by windows which had been furtively opened a finger's breadth. You blocked your nose and breathed through your mouth. The militia swore, men complained, children were wide-eyed in terror, women rocked babies to calm them. Granddad in his wheelchair was in the aisle between the seats, two boys perched over him because there was no other room.

Watching a train setting off for an extermination camp on TV, Dritan remembers the dusk departure of his own train, remembers the occasional stops, remembers the panic that would seize everyone in those moments. They knew that at each stop someone would be dragged off the train and, without a doubt, they would be killed. That day, their carriage was lucky. The doors didn't open until Bllaca, where they got down and walked on – between the tracks, because they'd been told the area was mined. Dritan remembers two of them carrying granddad in his wheelchair, so that he wasn't jolted over the stones and sleepers. It was night, and foggy. *Nacht und Nebel*. The smell of scorching rose from the ground. *They'd burned blankets to keep warm*. Soon they'd met other exiles who'd got there before them, felt the grip of their hands, heard their endless questions: where had they come from, had they by chance seen this family, was X alive, had Y escaped, had they happened to see a mother and daughter, looking like this, or a child, about so high? *Oh, but the questions would drive you mad.*

When at last they got away from the hands and the questions, they hadn't waited to find dry ground or bedding or blankets; they'd just lain down in the earth and slept. When dawn came, they opened their eyes. It was still foggy, but around them they saw blisters of ash on the ground where fires had been lit. The sleepers woke, and rubbed their eyes, and then found themselves unexpectedly frightening to each other. While they'd slept their faces had got covered with ash, and now that they'd rubbed them they looked like oil workers. Granddad in his wheelchair looked around stupefied, unable to comprehend why he was surrounded by multi-coloured faces. Suddenly it started to rain, and then stopped, and then started again

after half an hour. When it wasn't raining, the sun was scorching. Five minutes of rain, half an hour of sun. It was no surprise of a sunny morning to see the steam rising from bodies that had got damp during the night. It was as if you were watching their souls departing the bodies.

The nights were cold, and the spot they were in was muddy. Get wet where you stand, and dry out where you stand. The place was on a slope, and they'd go scrambling down and get themselves filthy trying to catch the bread that was thrown to them. Sometimes there were arguments over bread, when a loaf was caught by more than one hand. *If I live for a thousand years, I'll never forget the man with a large loaf in his hands, crying and stuffing it into his mouth*. Who knew when he'd last eaten? Who knew who he'd lost?

After a while they started to bring enough bread to go round. *We didn't worry about bread, but we worried about not getting enough*. How could you be sure it would come again tomorrow? So it wasn't hunger but insecurity that made people scramble over each other to grab as much bread as they could. There on the banks of the Vardar you could see damp and mouldy loaves stacked like log piles. People lacked security and they lacked shame. When you ate, you had to concentrate on your food only, because if you looked anywhere else you'd see someone answering the call of nature with no sense of shame.

Later they gathered some sticks and, with some nylon cord they'd brought, made a tent. *We sorted ourselves out like that, to get out of the rain if nothing else*. The tent seemed sufficient to them, even to his sisters who'd usually made even their house seem tiny. They spent five days there. On the morning of the sixth day his family had got going early, before the queues built up. A bus was waiting for them. *Because we were among the first, I got a seat on the steps of the bus. Someone with a camera came up and filmed me. I didn't know I was going to become famous; I didn't even give my permission.*

The camp they were sent to was nothing at all like Bllaca. It was totally different: night and day. In this camp there were proper tents, toilets, spare clothes, and a big tent like a hall, with a TV where you could watch news and films. *The bad news was that there was nothing about father; or the dog.*

They spent March there, and April, and May. June found them there too. As soon as the NATO troops crossed into Kosova at Hani i Elezit, Dritan

and his family packed their bags and set off after them. Not by train this time, or bus, but in a minibus. They returned with mixed feelings: happy to be going home, uneasy at not knowing what awaited them.

From the road they saw burned-out houses, destroyed buildings, burned-out cars, bullet-riddled walls, broken windows, slaughtered animals…

When they reached their house, they stopped at the gate leading into the yard, not afraid that there might be mines in there, but afraid that their father might not be. They waited there a while, in silence. Eventually one of the children called out. No one answered. No one opened the gate. There was no barking.

After a while the gate opened and their father appeared, just back from the hills, with that a look that said he couldn't believe what he was seeing. For four months they'd known nothing of him, nor he of them. He gazed at his wife, and at his children, and he didn't move.

Is it me, or is there a smell? Dritan said, breathing in, and he went inside. He sniffed through the rooms, under the table, in the cupboards, in the fridge, and when he opened the wardrobe where they kept the eiderdowns and blankets he saw the dog, laid out and covered with a blanket. They'd killed him with a single bullet. He took the dog in his arms and carried it out into the yard like a swaddled baby. They all gathered round the victim.

Dritan's story and the petrol seem to be running out at the same time, because I see Gazi indicating right and stopping to fill up. Beside the filling station store there's a petrol can. My mind leads me naturally to Mother Pashka.

'Liridon, why wasn't the generator making so much noise tonight?' she'd said to her grandson when he came up from the cellar, having just turned it off.

'Because I fixed up the new one.'

'Aha.'

Silence.

'Does it use much petrol?'

'I haven't touched the petrol. This new one runs on oil.'

'So where have you left the petrol?'

'In the cellar.'

'Very good, my boy.'

It was Monday evening. Not quite a week earlier, Marjan – his father and her son – had got back from work with dire news. That cursed Tuesday, for

only the second time in his life, he hated coming home. The first time had been more than twenty years before when, fresh out of high school, he'd collected his party membership. He'd not really wanted to, because he'd known his father would go mad, but he'd got caught up in the excitement of the moment. He'd known that his father wouldn't understand. In fact, the news had reached the house before he did. And even if it hadn't, he wouldn't have dared to keep it secret from his father. So when he'd got home he'd hesitated in the yard, thinking: I should tell him, but I don't want to; I could lie, except I couldn't; I could not tell him, but I don't dare, because he might have found out from someone else and then the earth's going to swallow me up.

In the end he'd decided to speak. Marjan had walked in, his father Deda had walked out.

'One Ballist, one Communist! There's not room enough for both under the one roof', said his father, pointing at him with his left hand; as a young man he'd lost his right in an explosion.

Marjan's head dropped, while his father had made for the shed where he kept his rifle. The whole family had rushed out, begging him to come back and telling him he couldn't kill his son over a membership card, but he'd kept on going. Pashka hadn't said a word, because she knew that if he'd decided to do it no one on earth could stop him, just as when he'd carried her off even though she hadn't loved him. As an educated girl who could read Albanian and Cyrillic, she'd refused to get married to a man who was twenty years older than her and whom, more importantly, she wasn't in love with. Come along, he'd said, we'll fall in love on the way; and he'd taken her. Her family had appeared rather timidly and taken her back. He gone again to carry her off a second time. Then, knowing that they'd take her back again, he'd sent word, brief and to the point: let me have this one, or I'll fuck up every one of you. And she'd filled Deda's house with boys and girls, who'd been bewildered when Marshal Tito visited Kosova and their father was put under house arrest – because word was going round that he'd been one of those who lent a hand to Ndue Përlleshi. Much as the notoriety made him proud, that particular phrase annoyed him because it reminded him how his missing hand had stopped him being an active member of the band. The children were also bewildered that in their home, unlike other Christian families', there were two sets of Ten Commandments: their

mother talked about the Ten Commandments of Moses, their father the Ten Commandments of Midhat Frashëri.

‘Come back, father’, Marjan had called, head down and hurrying after him. ‘This is a Ballist house –’

‘And it’ll never be Communist’, his father concluded, pausing in the doorway of the shed. ‘Get out of my sight! As long as I live, never dare to cross my threshold.’

Dejected, Marjan had walked out of the yard, and then out of the village, and then out of the town, and gone to Peja, to one of his mother’s relatives. He’d asked this uncle to try to find someone to get his name erased from the Party roll; but the uncle had refused and, a few days later, had brought the exile back to the village. The young man had stopped on the edge of the property, while his uncle had carried on into the yard. ‘O Deda Marku,’ he’d called up, ‘will you welcome a friend?’

‘You’re most welcome, Kola Krasniqi!’

After they’d drunk the odd raki or two, Kola had opened the conversation and Deda had closed it.

‘D’you think you and the boy might make it up one day?’

‘Never.’

After a few minutes of silence, Kola had tried to reopen the subject of Marjan, but Deda had revealed the full extent of the wrath in his heart, leaving his guest in no doubt that there was no room for the spirit of reconciliation in there, because *better dead than Red, and I’m never letting the evil in*.

‘It isn’t customary for the head of household to insult a friend in his parlour.’ Kola’s allusion to the traditional code of hospitality stopped Deda, who’d been in the process of lighting a cigarette, but now gazed hawk-eyed at his friend, who after a moment continued in the most hateful way possible in that house: ‘I’m a Communist too.’

Deda had considered him; had lit his cigarette; had sucked on it so hard that his cheeks went hollow; had expelled the smoke through his nose; and, because he could never go against the Kanun, which states that *the house belongs to God and the guest*, had declared:

‘Get that little sod in here. We’ve let one Red in; might as well make it two.’

Marjan had appeared warily, the prodigal son returning. And Kola had sat a while longer, and then asked leave to go, and got up. Marjan hurried after

and caught hold of him, saying he was afraid his father might kill him. Kola had reported the boy's concern to his father. Deda had answered with a question: 'Who can kill someone who's killed himself?'

A few months later, Marjan finished high school and told his father that he wanted to go to find work in Switzerland, to be able to support the family and educate his brothers.

'No you don't. You're not leaving; you're going to college.'

'Why?'

'To get your head straightened out; you've blackened our name.'

Marjan had realized that his father was never going to forgive him for lining up on the other side and, wanting to avoid that piercing gaze of his, had bowed his head.

'We Ballists, we of the National Front, we're not afraid to show our fronts', Deda had said, heading off for the field with head held high.

Deda had closed his eyes for the last time on Christmas Eve 1981, satisfied that his Red son had joined the protests against Yugoslav Communist oppression of Albanians.

When he'd got his Party papers, Marjan hadn't realized that it would upset his father so much. But this time, bringing news to his mother, he knew that her despair would be unavoidable and insurmountable; and so he was hating to come home. They'd contacted him while he was at work, and told him that they were bringing back the dead from Batajnica. Although his brothers had actually been killed four years before, it seemed to him that they'd died today, and it was as if both his arms had dropped off. So when he got home he hesitated in the yard, thinking: I should tell her, but I don't want to; I could lie, except I couldn't; if I don't tell her at all it could be worse, because she might hear it on the evening news.

For four whole years, each time he got in from work she'd ask him: anything new? For her, *new* meant news about her sons, Milan and Gjovalin. Five days a week, four years running, the same refrain, with a question that seemed general but, if one knew where the pain bit, was rather specific; a question that would inevitably prompt an answer that was so brief, and yet as heavy as a mountain. After his every *no*, she'd retreat into herself, pray silently, kiss the cross, genuflect, entreat Christ. And when on Monday her eldest son came in from work and she asked him as usual, with the usual spark of hope, if there was anything new, he gazed at her intently, found he couldn't hold her gaze and broke it and stared into the distance,

could not conceal the gravity of his news, his reddened eyes, the moisture that glistened and clouded his vision, and he sighed and said: yes.

That was all he said, because the words were getting knotted in his throat. His mother, who'd waited so patiently for that affirmative, in the hope that he'd say *yes, they're alive and soon they'll be released and come home*, tightened her hands into fists, pressed them into her chest, saw her son, and read in his face the message that he was extinguishing the last glimmer of her hope; and after his weary *yes* there came from his mother a long wailing *no*…

This *no* was repeated several times like an echo across the village. The children in the yard froze. A passer-by in the street stopped still. Farther off, across the field, someone trimming the bushes by the fence held the sickle hanging and listened. A whole district away someone opened a door; another opened a window. Everyone listened and no one could understand what had happened. Pashka's voice was like the voice of a mortally-wounded mountain spirit. A voice with superhuman force.

She couldn't imagine how she could live on, now that she knew her sons were no more.

Liridon hastily got a syringe and wanted to sedate her, but she clutched his arm. *Oh, don't give me an injection! Don't take the pain away – it's the pain of my boys.*

Still weighed down so heavily, she'd left the room; and when she appeared again she said: *anyone who sheds a tear insults this ritual.*

Milan's wife and Gjovalin's wife had looked at each other, and stopped crying. Her eldest son wiped away his tears with the back of his hand. The others had chivvied out of the room those children that couldn't stop their tears.

After a while people from their neighbourhood and from around the village had begun to gravitate towards her house, and she received them red-eyed but unweeping.

When she retired to her bedroom, Pashka took the crucifix in her hand, gazed at Christ and, as if he was her son, wept over him. All her life she had prayed that her children might live happy, and now she was alive and her children were dead… dead for four years and she hadn't known. They'd been killed the very day they were taken from her, and she had lived – she'd gone on eating, gone on drinking. Because of her extreme faith, because of her flawless devotion, her hope had turned into conviction. And now that

this news had come like a thunderclap from a clear sky, her soul was stunned, her heart was shattered, her mind was darkened. There was light, but she didn't see it. Day would come, but she wouldn't notice it. Until now she had kindled that spark of hope; now she must get used to darkness. She'd always said that people see with the mind, not the eye. Now, when the world around her turned to night, she understood that hope had been her generator through those four years of waiting. This realization reduced her to despair. It was no coincidence that the word for despair, *desperatus*, was the opposite of the word for hope, *speratus*.

The next day she went to the morgue at Rahovec to identify the bodies and insisted on touching them. *Oh Marjan,* she said when she came out, *they burned them*. On the way home, her mind played the film of her life with the two boys: she saw them when they were babies, a year between them; when they were learning to walk; when she sent them off to school; when they read out poems from the books by their Uncle Mark, *Grandpa's Tales* and *Special Delivery*; when, a bit older, they were given *The Mountain Lute* to hold and to pick out the words with a finger while she recited it by heart. She remembered how their expressions caught fire when brave Oso Kuka burned himself and took his enemies with him; she remembered them later taking the book out and hiding it, one night in the hay, another night in the straw; she remembered them growing tobacco and then warily starting to smoke it; she remembered how they'd sit with her to watch Serbian-language TV, them watching the film while she translated the sub-titles for them; she remembered the weddings and the births of grandsons and granddaughters, everything else up until that Tuesday when the paramilitaries came, faces camouflaged with scarves and balaclavas, and they wrecked and burned the houses and the barns, when they beat the villagers and ordered them to get in their tractors and leave for Albania and then, when Korenica was far behind them and they'd just got to Meja, when members of the *Tigers* unit appeared, in their black uniforms, and separated the men from the women. She remembered how they'd killed Claudia, little lovely Claudia, when she was running to hide in the church. She remembered herself screaming that she wasn't going to leave her sons in the hands of criminals; how they beat her grandson Liridon with the butts of their rifles and threw him into the tractor; when they took her eldest son… Then she remembered the meadow, and the people being ordered to lie down with their hands behind their backs. She remembered how, devastated

by that image, she looked to see Father Marjan kissing the cross and trying to calm everyone. She remembered how she'd looked at Gjovalin's five children and Milan's four children and knew she had to be strong. She remembered how they released her eldest son and several other men as surplus to requirements. (Someone had counted the people lying down and said there were four hundred, and so they'd fulfilled the quota of retribution for four dead Serb militiamen.) She remembered how her second son had started up the tractor and set off, while she just kept looking back to where her two other boys were laid out in the meadow among those hundreds of hostages. She remembered seeing how Milan's head lifted when he heard their tractor starting up, and how it fell again just before the ones with the rifles appeared… And now there was nothing left, except the memories and these carbonized corpses. And memories came in the same way: in pieces, mixed up, and with a smell of charring.

It's the moments we remember, not the days; that's what a poet had said half a century earlier, a poet who'd decided to die the day his hopes had died. In a state of hopelessness, he had cried out *Oh cherished hope* and closed his eyes forever.

Pashka saw the film in glorious technicolour, while the view through the car window was black and white. Grey and black. Black.

Unnatural mortality. Backwards death. Chaotic death.

Natural mortality, proper death, orderly death is when the child buries the parent; that's the old saying. Whereas backwards death is when the parent buries the child.

A child is a project, a dream, a future. When a child dies, the parents' future is killed. They hadn't really been children anymore, but to her they always remained so. Their duty was to pick up the stone where their parents left it, and carry it a little farther.

The pain was vast now; but she still had meaning.

That Thursday, at the burial, she didn't cry and she didn't open her mouth. She scolded her fifth boy to the point that he cried. They had to be strong, to support the two daughters, and the two young widows, and the five grandsons and four granddaughters, all fatherless now, the eldest only fourteen.

The flames of human agony burned in her silence. She endured; she reflected. She seemed to bear some great grudge. She'd been a Catholic all her life – devout, fanatical even – and for the last four years she had

entreated God and she had entreated Christ, day and night, in speech and in silence, in the house, in the fields, in the church, certain that faith is rewarded in the end. And what was the reward? The revelation of the truth about the fate of her sons. And this illumination was a great darkening: her sky went black; no more rays of light would break through.

During that last supper, as she was dividing up the bread she felt that she was dividing her own heart. She had plummeted into despair, to the point where she wanted to feel physically this ripping up of her heart and her body. She was used to living on bread, salt and water during Lent; now she wanted to be the bread, she wanted to be the salt, she wanted to be the water. She wanted the pangs of agony to have fangs and to devour her.

After she shared out the meal and then, later, discreetly shared out her money, ordering each person not to tell anyone else, she'd begun to chat nostalgically with her daughter who'd come back from abroad for the burial of her brothers. They sat and spoke for hours, in a way they'd never done before. She fretted that she might not have brought her sons up properly, that she'd not been a good mother to them.

They'd grown up under a spartan regime, working from dawn to noon in the yard and the fields, then half an hour for lunch and half an hour's rest and then back to work. When they were young she'd not let them mix with the neighbourhood adjacent, and she'd done the same with her grandsons and granddaughters. A big family – thirty people or so – they were more or less a neighbourhood unto themselves. If they wanted to play they had the yard, or the meadow, and they didn't need to mix with anyone else. If the boys wanted to play football they had the girls, and there were enough for two teams. Her home, with its fields and meadows, was a small encampment. Her routine was strict: food at seven, work from eight to twelve, food, half an hour's rest, an hour's play for the children while the adults went straight back to work, and so on till dusk. They worked all day: men, women and children. Sometimes they ploughed, sometimes they watered, sometimes they pruned, sometimes they scythed. Someone would be fixing the fence, someone turning the garden, someone herding the pigs, someone planting trees, someone picking fruit, someone milking the cows, everyone conforming to the schedule set by Pashka, whose manner, since Deda's death, had begun to bear a very close resemblance to his. She insisted on everyone being worked until their foreheads ran with sweat. If she saw someone resting, she'd go up to them and ask if they were sick and

needed an ambulance. Peppers, tomatoes, potatoes, watermelons, beans, corn, flour, tobacco… they could do it all, and do it themselves. Since the tobacco alone brought in more than twenty-five thousand Deutschmarks, and even that was more than they needed to get by, she detailed the boys to help families in difficulty and liberation fighters – just as they'd supported the movement for peaceful resistance. They were giving money to needy families every month, and they gave three tonnes of flour to the liberation struggle. One of the prominent commanders from the district would often come to thank Mother Pashka, and to swap verses from the *Mountain Lute*. He'd start off with 'God save us, Nikolla, have a care! Oso Kuka has gunpowder there'. And she'd reply: 'The wildest Albanian I ever knew, To fire himself and take you too.' Then the commander would embrace her and thank her for her hospitality and generosity. While she and the two older boys were sitting with these guests from the grey, the fourth son, Milan her *most beloved*, as its etymology implies, whom she'd named as head of household – which meant holding the family purse-strings too – would come out with his other brother, Gjovalin, and hand over the family's contribution to the war effort. While the pow-wow went on inside, chatting and singing, outside they'd be filling up the tractor with food for the fighters: fruit, vegetables, tobacco, wine and raki. She'd raised her children on two books: the Gospels and the *Lute*, the father in heaven and the fatherland. With the first she taught them to love one another and not to kill, and with the second she taught them to love their homeland and to aid those who were killing and being killed in its name. Seeing those tractors full of food brought it home: without the fuel being donated by the workers and the rich, the Resistance machine wouldn't be going anywhere. Everyone was doing their bit: those with guns in their hands, and those who were open-handed towards them. Gjovalin and Milan were loading the tractor with nourishment for a liberty that was still starved and stumbling. They couldn't know that it would only grow to full strength by swallowing them.

When, on that accursed Tuesday, the soldiers and paramilitaries had been ordered to kill four hundred Albanians and had pulled Milan out of the throng of hostages and put a bullet in his head, Gjovalin had been stupefied and – though he could do nothing to help him – he'd run towards him, at least to be able to hold him and stop him hitting his head as he fell. But his brother was still out of reach, when the arms he stretched out towards him were flung up, and he fell beside him, scythed down by a machine gun.

Milan had come into the world after Gjovalin. Gjovalin had gone into the next world after Milan. Where one was, there would be the other. They could neither live nor leave without each other.

When she heard this description of the massacre from an eye-witness, Pashka had clutched her hands to her bosom, taking on a resemblance to the suffering St Mary. After the last supper, she'd gone to her room, opened a chest and taken out all the photographs. An hour later someone had glimpsed her throwing everything into the hearth and hurried to stop her, but by then she'd put it all on the fire; she went out saying: *They're nothing now; not people, not paper. Dust and ashes.* Back in the sitting room she went on chatting as if nothing had happened: as if the photos hadn't burned and her sons hadn't died. Only when the clock showed four after midnight, or in the morning, and when she saw her daughter's heavy eyelids, did she realize it was time to sleep. She wished her daughter goodnight, and stretched out.

Sleep is the brother of death, and yet it is still not death. And she wished herself death. She'd lived four years on a routine of hope. Seven days on a routine of hopelessness. In the darkness, the ticking minute hand was turning towards the hour of revolt. A revolt against life, self, humanity and God. Where was justice? Four hundred men cut down in the meadow, and from the mountains not a single shot. Four hundred men massacred in broad daylight, and from the heavens not a single thunderclap.

While the others slept and snored, she had gazed into the darkness. She had prayed so fervently to God, but her prayers had not reached heaven. She'd prayed in her room and in the chapel, and for nothing. She knew, she must have known, Paul's letter to the Corinthians, in which the body of man is seen as the temple of God. If it was as the apostle's epistle said, then how could God have let the bodies of her sons become crumbs and embers? How could he sit there with the killers unpunished? There was a meadow nearby filled with crosses and graves: four hundred temples desecrated and heaven made no murmur. Thirteen thousand people had been killed in the war, another twenty thousand or so raped; so, more than thirty thousand temples profaned, and still the heavens were silent and the earth was indifferent.

She'd loved life a lot, back when she had her sons, even back when she at least had hope. *For whoever wants to save his life will lose it*, as the gospel told her. And now what was life to her, without Milan and Gjovalin? Such a

life was only worth hating. *He who hates his life in this world shall keep it to life eternal*.

Tuesday had still not dawned, and she'd opened the door, taken the matches from the chimney, and gone downstairs and into the cellar. It was a mess down there, but her determination had found the red petrol can in the end. Of the ten litres the can held, there were three litres or so left.

It was enough.

Because it was still early, when she'd gone out into the yard she'd taken a stick from the fence and put a couple of stones in her coat pocket so she had something to ward off any dogs.

Strangely, not even the dogs in her own house heard her leaving like a shadow. No one had seen her. They were all sleeping. It was still dark. Like that – with stones in her pocket, the petrol can in one hand and a stick in the other – she went out of the yard, walked through the silhouettes of the trees and made for the graves at Meja. She trod like a phantasm between night and day, the moment when night has ended and day has not yet begun.

She'd sat down at the graves of her sons, which were in the first row. *Seated on their tomb she made lament over her dead children*. She straightened the flowers and wreaths, she caressed the gravestones, she spoke to them, and then she set off again, towards home. Towards home, but not for home. When she reached the halfway point between the house and the graves – between the living and the dead – where she'd left the can and the matches, she left the road and walked into the meadow. A few steps farther on she stopped by a fence, overgrown with shrubs and thorns. She took the lid off the can. She drenched herself in petrol. She threw the can aside and picked up the box of matches. She turned her face towards the graves, where her hopes had been buried, and with iron resolution she lit the match.

A while later a car was passing, two people inside. One said: God, look, someone's set fire to themselves! The other replied: that's not a person, is it? It's a scarecrow.

Because it was more natural to see a scarecrow on fire in a field than a woman with arms outstretched who'd set light to herself, they carried on towards work and didn't interrupt the mother's last dance, the dance of farewell.

Unlike the epic sacrifice at Vranina, this in Meja was a lyric sacrifice – that's to say, it was more tragic. Not a sacrifice to protect the fields where

the cattle grazed, but a sacrifice for sons murdered in the fields. Not a sacrifice to inspire the struggle against the oppressor, but a sacrifice to condemn the silence of the mountains, the cruelty of the oppressor and the indifference of the Creator. She could understand all of it, but not that divine lack of concern. Humans might be unjust, but not the heavens.

Was she out of her mind when she set fire to herself?

No. Even Don Quixote's mind was clear at the last, so there's no doubt about someone whose mind was always clear.

Had she the right to kill herself?

Who has the right to ask such a question, of a mother whose heart has been shattered by pain? She begged God constantly, day and night, to make a distinction between good and evil, to punish the evil and to save her sons, and He lay back comfortably in his heaven of indifference. Aren't you getting cold there, God? Come and warm yourself at my flames! And she lit the match.

A few hours later the sleepers had woken and gone into the sitting room. They began the day calmly, certain that she was somewhere in the house, or perhaps the yard. Later they asked one another, with no particular premonition, where Mother had got to. I don't know, said the first. I don't know, said the second. I don't know, said the third. After the third answer, each such answer fuelled their unease. Once they'd all answered the same way, the whole house was worried.

After the worry, began the looking.

She wasn't in the house. She wasn't in the yard. She wasn't in the field. She wasn't in the road. She wasn't in the church. She wasn't up the hill. She wasn't down at the river.

Where could she be?

A team of specialist divers was brought in to search the river, without success. All Tuesday and Wednesday they looked for her. That evening one of them said: that last supper, Grandma gave me some money. Another said: me too. Me too, said a third. And that's how they all understood that she'd shared out her money, and gone off somewhere where she wouldn't be needing it anymore.

On Thursday, while the divers and the rest went on searching, Liridon recalled his grandmother's last words about the petrol can, and he hurried down to the cellar. He went through all the rubbish there and he didn't find the red can. Then he climbed the steps and told them not to bother searching

the river anymore. *Grandmother has set fire to herself*. They all gazed at him, stupefied.

And then Marjan remembered an evening when they'd been watching the news, and it mentioned the return of some corpses to Merdare border crossing, and she'd said: *If my boys don't come back to me alive, I will burn myself*. Three years later, when she was watching the news and it wasn't mentioning the missing anymore, quite out of the blue she'd said that it wouldn't be a bad thing to set fire to herself in front of the Parliament of Kosova. *But no*, she concluded, *that wouldn't work, because there are lots of people and they'd see me and they wouldn't let me be*.

Marjan cried out: she won't be in water. And he made for the fields to look for his mother. At noon they found her, arms spread wide and carbonized, amid the unmown grass. (That night the pair who'd passed her in the car appeared on the news, eaten up with remorse that they hadn't stopped.)

It took a few hours for the family to make ready to bury her. They'd thought to bury her between her sons – such had been her wish – but they couldn't get permission. She wasn't a victim of the war, or a fallen hero. Wasn't she though? Then they thought about burying her in the churchyard, where they put the Catholics, but because the scriptures forbade suicide they didn't dare ask if it was possible. Throughout her life she'd really been a model believer, but the way she'd ended her life seemed to have shattered everything. *Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?*

Someone said they surely couldn't leave her above ground, so she had to be buried. Where though? The churchyard. But the church forbade suicide. No one had spoken of it. They'd not dared ask the priest, because they didn't want to embarrass him: he would surely know – it was there in black and white – that life was God's to give and to take. But something was surely amiss with scripture; otherwise God would seem to be equally guilty.

They set to work with picks and shovels, and dug a grave next to Deda's. Then they carried the coffin to its mouth. Catholics came and Muslims came. Priests came too. Merely as spectators, of course. Silence. How do you bury a body without a priest? Everyone was thinking it, no one was saying it. And then – from the church at Gjakova, where he served – Father Marjan appeared, Marjan Lorenci, who that black Tuesday, when they'd been stopped at Meja, had been on a tractor and had seen Pashka when

they'd taken her sons from her, had seen her pain from close by. Now, understanding that pain, he stepped forward in front of everyone and performed the sacred service for her. Everyone silently approved of it and no one mentioned it – not then, not later that day, and not in the future.

And that was the end of the story of mother Pashka, who killed herself and was nonetheless buried with due religious ceremony.

While I was recalling the story, Gazi has filled up the car and bought three bottles of water; he gets back in and we continue on our way. I have the impression that the car is still stationary, and the hills and fields and oak trees and houses are moving past us in the other direction.

I think to myself: it had been written. It had been written that we would stop at the filling station, that the petrol pump would bear the name of Christ's grandmother, that there would be a petrol can there, that the can would remind me of the can that mother Pashka had carried, and that her tragedy would thence unfold in my mind. And I understand that nothing may be written if it has not been written that it shall be written. Nothing may be written down here, if it has not first been written up there, in the stars. Not even this work shall be written, if it has not been written that it shall be written. We simply cannot evade destiny, we cannot avoid such actions, we cannot wriggle away from something that has been ordained. We're puppets in the mystic hands that weave our fate. A string is cut, a puppet falls, a life ends. When children see puppets in the theatre, they believe in the will of the puppets; but grown-ups know that they can't move without the hidden puppeteer. In a puppet show – when Daddy puts on a show, say – Mummy and the children are seeing different things. In their mother's lap, the children see the antics of the puppets. In the lap of the gods, Mummy sees the antics of her husband. At the end, the children applaud the puppets, the woman her husband. Eventually the day comes when they all think the same way, that their life is a performance, that their voluntary actions hang on strange strings, moving in invisible hands.

In French 'marionette', or 'little Mary' – so called because in mediaeval France these puppets on their wires or strings usually performed religious themes, with the Virgin Mary a popular character. Today in France any kind of puppet is a marionette, but we shouldn't forget that Mary was the first of them. Mary who was in God's hands, whom he inspired with the Holy Spirit and who bore his Son; Mary who so rejoiced at the birth of her Son, whom they took from her and killed in his innocence – two years short of

the mid-point of life, according to the psalms. The day of the crucifixion became part of Easter, the second Paschal festival. Because there was more than one. The first is the Jewish Passover: the transition from slavery to freedom. The second is the Christian: the transition from the material life to the spiritual. The third is the Albanian: the transition from spiritual flame to physical cinder. The first occurred in Egypt, the second in Golgotha, the third in Gjakova.

Why didn't our Pashka – Easter, in Albanian – pick somewhere higher up, somewhere more visible, maybe up on a hill? Well, if you really want to know, *when hope burns, it matters little where the ash falls*. Mary came from Nazareth to the place of skulls, Golgotha, to see the Paschal passing of her son. Pashka came from Korenica to Meja to make her own. Perhaps Mary was uncomfortable about her Son being a marionette in the hands of God, but her Son was resolute. It was to be the first and last time that the puppet was more conscious than the spectator.

But doesn't this notion of puppets take away human guilt? In reality, doesn't one puppet occasionally cut the strings of another? Isn't it sometimes the case that the puppeteer has died and we keep moving through force of habit, or through individual instinct? Who killed Milan and Gjovalin? The puppeteer, or other puppets? Marionettes with bayonets?

During the war in Bosnia, the man who today is President in Belgrade and represents his country in the marathon dialogue with Kosova blustered from the parliamentary pulpit: we'll kill a hundred Muslims for every one Serb! And now I see the graves of the village of Meja before me: one hundred Catholics for one Serb; four hundred Albanians for four Serbs.

One hundred for one. One hundred mortals for one deity. Crime hides in declamation more than in bullets. One is worth one hundred. The Muslims of Bosnia and the Albanians of Kosova aren't worth as much as we are, they say, sharpening their bayonets. What is articulated by the representatives of the people is implemented by their trash. It's no longer clear who's the cream and who's the dung.

We were *dogs of war*, Zoran Rašković said in an interview; he'd become a member of the *Jackals* paramilitary unit when he was nineteen. *We were manipulated*, he said. Sure, dogs will be dogs, especially if they're jackals; but the Serb people might have thought that they'd elected people who would manage things for them, not manage things just for themselves and unleash their dogs against *second-hand citizens*. One of us is worth a

hundred of them, said one of the hot-heads of parliament who's now risen to be head of state. Well, the massacre happens in the mind, and in the field it's only repeated. *They're second-class citizens, a primitive people*: the beast screeches within him; it has absorbed his conscience. We all know what to do with inferior races: rape them, kill them, massacre them, burn them, throw them into vast pits. With violence and violation let's show them who's toughest; let's humiliate them, so they understand that they should be humble because we're elite; let's kill them, so they see that God is with us and won't lift a finger to help them; let's massacre them, so they realize that there's nothing dignified about their deaths; let's burn them, just like the *inferior races* were burned during the Second World War; let's cast their remains into mass pits, not to cover up a crime, because this act is no crime, but to show them that they only deserve to be noticed and considered by the worms. When you burn them, make sure to grill both sides because I hear that worms like their meat well done.

Then they charged in, Nebojša's *jackals* and Arkan's *tigers* and Šešelj's *eagles*, and they drenched a defenceless people in blood and left again, leaving behind them more than a hundred massacres, more than a thousand murdered children hacked and burned, more than twenty thousand girls, women and men raped, hundreds of thousands brutalized, a million exiled and traumatized. Many of them came into Kosova in just the same way they went into Bosnia: with the same hatred, the same nicknames. *We weren't drugged, or drunk,* said a repentant Zoran, *but insane*.

The massacre at Meja had been a masterpiece of slaughter. When the massacre was complete, four hundred innocents for four criminals, the dead were piled into the centre of the meadow, one on top of another. In the aftermath of the massacre, those who reached the spot first were met by a horrifying vision, more horrifying than the skull scene in *Apotheosis of War*. Crows pecking at heads, crows pulling out entrails, crows eating eyes. Heads without bodies, tossed about; bodies without heads, stacked high. Then the order had come from Milošević to make the traces of the crimes disappear, so trucks were filled with the slaughtered and the burned, in that field and in other fields and valleys, someone picking up the body, someone picking up the head. Frequently unsure which head belonged to which body, they just tossed them in like logs and cabbages. They filled the trucks to bursting, until it was difficult to shut the tailgates. When the trucks moved

they dripped blood. The criminals went away, but they left a trail of blood behind them. It was April, *the cruellest month*.

Who'd have thought that the world would allow such a crime to happen, one sunny day in the middle of a meadow in Europe? Who'd have believed that the world would sleep while those over-flowing trucks drove through the night to Batajnica, towards those triumphal arches of crime, where the bulldozers had already dug the biggest mass grave in the whole of Yugoslavia to hide the victims, the shot, the slashed, the burned? Who'd have imagined that twenty years after the war the internationals and the Albanians still wouldn't have managed to recover those bodies from their claws?

The question is left hanging; the silence is clanging. At Meja, meanwhile, gravestones gleam over the graves now, some with crosses and some without. Each with a sloping side, they seem to lie like shields facing the sun. In the pure peace of night, they resemble an army waiting for the attack, while in the dusty bustle of day the sun's arrows are embedded in them. It seems that the battle between mankind and fate doesn't end even for the dead.

More than a thousand Albanian dead still lie waiting in Serb mud, until they lose patience with the futile dialogue of the living and rise up one night, like in one of Lagerkvist's stories, and exchange not bones but earth with the Serb victims of revenge. The living speak of territorial exchange, but really that's for the dead, so that they might rest in their own lands, so that there's no repeat of the trade in the pain of the families of the missing – as there was a few years back when certain Albanian extortionists pretended they had contact with the missing (with the imprisoned, they claimed) and sought money from the families to put them in touch. Their evil went as far as having someone at the other end of the line impersonating someone missing, their voice different only as a result of torture. Crime with the living, commerce with the dead; there's only a thread that separates them, and many threads that link them. These deceptive agents who intermediate between the living and the dead and amass money by selling hopes, were becoming even more hypocritical than Chichikov the buyer of souls.

Many families in Meja and Korenica paid a high price for hope. Pashka's family were among the few who didn't fall into their clutches. Because of her unshakeable faith, she had her hope and didn't need to buy it. But just as the Soviet invasion brought the Prague Spring to an end, so Pashka's

hopes died with the return of her two sons' bodies. The Czech student Jan Palach could see no more hope for his country, and so he burned himself to death. Pashka could see no more hope for herself, and so she too set a match to herself. Just as the self-immolation of an itinerant trader gave impetus to the Arab Spring in Tunisia, so Pashka's burning of herself sparked public consciousness of the need to care for those mothers who'd lost their dear ones during the war. In the absence of any particular institutional support, civil society activists showed their sympathy for the mothers by making themselves available for whatever they needed. There's no other way to explain people's enormous interest in visiting Ferdonija.

While I've been thinking along these lines, Dritan seems to have been dozing a while, and now he turns and asks Gazi why he's so caught up in the case of Ferdonija.

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Gazi replies:

‘I’m interested in anyone who’s gone through trauma in the war.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I know what trauma means.’

‘What’s your trauma?’

‘Oof.’

Dritan looks to his left again and stares. I likewise come out of my retrospections. We wait for him to speak, but he seems to have forgotten how.

‘Is it true they played Russian roulette against your heads?’ Dritan pushes.

‘Oh, I don’t know’, says Gazi, which is as good as saying ‘I don’t know, I wasn’t there when they beat me up.’ ‘I felt the gun against my forehead and I heard it click – on an empty chamber.’

We’re all eyes and ears, when after a brief silence Gazi starts to tell his story, interrupting himself repeatedly, partly because *I don’t want to dwell on the past*, partly because he’s hesitant about speaking. Pulling the fragments together, his story is as follows.

One night, Gazi – then 23 – was staying at Esad Mekuli’s house because his mother had phoned from Peja and begged him not to stay at home alone. *Go to your Uncle Esad’s house! Don’t stay on your own!* And so he’d left his flat in the Santeja district and gone to the Quarter of the Muhaxhers If you wanted books you could find all you wanted at Uncle Esad’s, he who’d created not only books but writers. But it was a time when even the turning of a page might make enough noise to bring down a wolf on the fold. Fear had deprived people of the strength to take a book off the shelf; however much even the closed book seemed to say: *I long, oh how I long, I desire/to embolden you with song,/you with your weaselly words/to raise strength from its slumber…*

Anyway, Gazi goes to the upper floor, which has its own entrance, and settles in the sitting room with Xhevdet – or Xhevda, as he calls him – who having sent his family away from Kosova has decided to stay to look after the house and his musical instruments. There’s a photograph on the wall of him with the other members of the first Albanian rock group. Records, cassettes and videos cover shelves and tables. The composer, who’d been one of the group’s founders, is softly whistling a tune – perhaps *Three Glasses*, the writer of which has been brutally killed in his home just a few

days earlier. He’s got no way of knowing his own destiny in the midst of this madness, much less the fate of the other two band members, the soloist and the drummer, who’ve been swallowed by the war.

It’s a wartime evening, with its deafening silence. A while later they hear a noise in the yard. The two of them step out of the room and, in the corridor, they see the security camera showing a man in a black uniform holding a pistol to the neck of Uncle Esad’s daughter, Drita, who’d gone to open the door. Gazi and Xhevda gape at one another in a state of panic; they don’t know what to do, whether to hide or to show themselves, to stay or to go, to wait inside or to get out. They decide to wait in the corridor. They hear the door opening downstairs, and then they hear swearing, kicking, punching, and after a moment they see the uniforms coming up the stairs, dragging mother Sadete and grappling with her daughter. She’s yelling at them in Serbian, they’re hitting her in barbarian. There are four of them, with a fifth standing guard in the yard. Two are occupied with the women, while the other two get to work on the men. One hits Gazi with the butt of his revolver and he goes sprawling on the floor. Lying there semi-conscious, he sees them pushing Xhevda into one room and Drita into another, and Sadete being kicked into the sitting room. Drita’s putting up more of a fight, as they grip her by the arms, but she’s overwhelmed; she’s pushing back against them, they’re hitting her. You can’t do this, she gasps. It’s against the law, it’s against God. But which law? they ask. Which God? The one who’ll break your neck. Let’s see whose side God is on. Doctors have borders, they sneer, but we don’t, showing that they know she’s been working in the conflict zone as a Doctors Without Borders activist. Gazi tries to get up but someone smacks him hard again and he loses consciousness for a bit. When he opens his eyes, he only realizes where he is thanks to the kicks he’s getting, sometimes in his body and sometimes in his head. As soon as he covers his head with his hands they hit him in the stomach; when his hands cover his stomach and groin they hit him in the head. Then they’re smashing his ribs, sometimes hitting him with boots, sometimes with a chair. When they take a break from beating him, he can hear the shouts and cries and punches and kicks coming from the other rooms. He feels something cold pressing against his forehead. In those moments he’s reminded of an older history, fifty-five years before, when they shot his grandfather, Emrush Myftari, at the age of 37, because he was accused of being a British spy. He’d been an officer in the Spanish Civil

War, a comrade of Asim Vokshi, Xhemal Kada, Skënder Luarasi and Petro Marko. The last of those, indeed, had written with great enthusiasm for the heroism of this Kosovar, a cultured person interested in literature who'd admired the creativity of the young Petro and kept him away from the bullets, getting him work as a war correspondent. When they brought him in front of Luigi Longo, the latter said: *This is a good writer and journalist. Better for him to report what's going on here than to be killed in the fighting*. That's how Petro Marko began his work as a *Volunteer of Freedom*. Besides his newspaper articles he was making notes for the novel *Hasta la Vista*, about which another correspondent in Spain, Ernest Hemingway, would write to him years later – Hispanicizing his name – *Dear Pedro, I received your novel and I thank you. Unfortunately, I can't read it at all because I don't know your language. I'm sure of one thing, though: the writer who loves man and dies for him, writes well*. Even in old age Petro Marko would remember his Kosovar friend fondly, recalling a visit by *Luljeta, the daughter of Emrush Myftari, a marvellous Kosovar lad who made it back alive from the Spanish War only to meet death in Kosovo at the hands of Miladin* [Popović]. Such were the sentiments of Petro, ending his recollections of his comrade in arms. But this digression is going on a bit long, isn't it? Better to say simply: Emrush was shot in what they called *Strelishte*, the Shooting Gallery, near Taukbahçe in Prishtina, just a few minutes away from the place where Gazmend, the son of his daughter, has been waiting to die. While the figure of his grandfather has been flashing through Gazmend's mind, they've broken his ribs and his face is bloody and they've started to play with his head. He feels the icy iron against his forehead and he hears the trigger going back. He waits for the bang. He waits for the bullet. Click! No bang from the gun, and no bullet. Something metal hits him in the head and his vision goes dark. *I was opening my eyes but I couldn't see anything. It was like I was delirious. I couldn't grasp what was happening anymore*. Just as the delirium fades and his vision clears, he sees how on the other side of the room one of them is hitting Sadete intermittently, telling her he knows who she is very well. Sadete had been a famous doctor. Her renown had taken root in 1981, when she'd tended wounded protestors in secret. Then the militia had stayed in the hospital so that none of the wounded could get in, but she found them anyway and smuggled them into the hospital for treatment in the white coats of medical staff. These deeds made her a national legend, and in the

same year Kadare started writing his *The Wedding Procession Turned to Ice* about her. Not yet eighteen years later, this militiaman hasn't forgotten what the doctor had done, and he's hitting her and yelling at her, though she's lost consciousness sometime before. The sight sickens Gazi. The blows against her hurt more than the blows against himself, and he tries to raise his feeble hand so the man might see him and leave the old woman alone. And that's how it goes. He leaves the old woman and comes back to the young man, cursing him and hitting him anywhere and anyway he can. By now Gazi is used to the thrashing, and the blows to his body are making less of an impression; he's more aware of the exchanges, the cries, the blows from the other rooms. He smiles because the one who's calling him a terrorist is using terror against him. Then a punch to his head hurts him badly. *Strangely, in that condition it was festive moments that came back to me, when I'd been with my family. I'd thought that sort of thing only happened in films, but it's true. In the worst moments, we're reminded of the best moments*. He remembers birthdays, cutting a cake, his parents smiling, his brother Mentor congratulating him, his brother Ilir with a cigarette on his lips and his fingers on the piano keys playing some jazz. Are those happy times really flickering before his eyes, or has something gone wrong with his vision as a result of the battering he's getting from the spiteful individual who never stops taking out his frustration on the *terrorist* and *irredentist*? In his delirium he sees his beloved, sees her smiling. Seeing his smile, the angry paramilitary swears and puts the gun to his forehead again. For a moment Gazi comes to again. He feels the trigger tighten. *Hasta la vista, Linda.* Click! Again, nothing happens.

The abuse went on for hours, from those black-uniformed insignia-less masked men. Swearing and beating, blows with fist and boot and rifle butt, and chair; throwing them against the wall, the table, the window. And every now and then, the figure appearing in front of Gazi and putting the barrel against his forehead and pulling the trigger, but it didn't fire. Three attempts at ignition; three times dry. Maybe he was keeping the bullets in his pocket, maybe there was only one bullet in the cylinder and it just hadn't come up yet. Gazi couldn't see if the gun was a revolver, with a cylinder, or a pistol with a magazine, although in his bewildered semi-conscious state this at least was interesting to him. Whatever the gun was, it would be sufficient to kill him. You couldn't say: sorry, I'm not satisfied with this pistol; usually they kill me with a revolver.

Then one of the men had ripped out the telephone cable and started to tie up the victims. They got to Gazi last. None of the victims could understand why they were being tied, what was going to happen once they were tied. At that moment the voice of a sentry came from outside, the masks looked at each other and hurried out. They went out into the yard, let off a volley of shots against the house, and then they were gone.

Up in the house they were all still alive, but battered and bloody, and no one knew what to say to mother Sadete's questions; she suffered from sclerosis, and so couldn't understand what had been happening. What was that? Why are you bleeding? Why does my body ache? Who tied us up?

Xhevda was looking at his mother-in-law and didn't know what to say. She'd forgotten the terror of just a few minutes before; while he, like Drita and Gazi, would never be able to forget – this night, this darkness, this fear. He envied her her sickness.

Slowly, Gazi goes down the stairs, sees the front door turned into a sieve, goes out into the yard, shuts the gate with a key so there'd be no more 'guests', and goes upstairs again, to that unimagined chaos.

The next morning, the four of them leave the house and, concealing their massacred faces so they won't be noticed by the militiamen who are here and there on the roads, set off for Xhevda's parents in Kurriz, where they stay for several weeks, watching the war through the window and making plans to leave Kosova. At last, in June, they get to hear of a bus taking people from Prishtina to the border near Skopje. They haven't even got out of the capital – no further than the ring road – when militiamen appear in front of the bus. It's packed with women: just four men, including the driver and an old man. A militiaman gets on, and drags Xhevda and Gazi out. He starts to ask why they're going, if they don't feel safe, what they think about NATO – all these cynical questions – until another militiaman hurries up and says something to his colleagues and they head off in the direction he's just come from. This new militiaman thinks they got down from the bus because they felt like it, and he yells at them and orders them back on the bus. They don't need to be told twice, and shortly afterwards the bus sets off towards Skopje again. Every time they're stopped at a checkpoint, the passengers stop breathing out of fright. At last they get to the border, where Macedonian militiamen get the men off the bus and shove them into a room *just to check*; the door closes and the lights go out and the *unchecked* beating begins. When the lights come on half an hour later and

the door opens, the beaten are sprawled on the ground and covered in blood. By the time they get back onto the bus, the blood is mixed with sweat. It's June; it's roasting even at night. At Stankovec they give their names, Gazmend Bajri, Xhevdet Gashi, and in return they get a number, a kind of ID card. They've seen queues like this in films about the Holocaust, where a person is nothing more than a number.

Gazi sees a space among the refugees and drops down in a daze, staring and clutching at the card with its number like he's desperate not to lose this last trace of his identity as a human, or at least something living.

That night, as Gazi sat desolate among the lost, Dritan was one tent away watching a tragi-comic film and Elie Wiesel, who'd been walking the camp the whole day, was writing his *report*.

It was a clear night, but not enough to be able to read one's fate in the stars. Now though, having been *without bread and without freedom, slaves in our own house*, as Drita's father put it, having been *filthy Turks and Albs*, time would heal the wounds: *after the dark night/ of the centuries/ the new age opens its arms to us…/ Yes, we are alive!/ The sun shines for us too.*

Kosova was liberated a few days later. A few months later, Doctors Without Borders won the Nobel Peace Prize for the peace that Drita too had strived for, a volunteer doctor tortured barbarously in war just because she was working for peace.

After Gazi finishes his story, Dritan asks him if he'd like to see the person who beat him again.

Gazi thinks a bit, watches the road ahead, and then looks intently at Dritan and says:

'Yeah, I'd really like to meet him again.'

'Why?'

'To look him in the eye, just once.'

'But they had masks, didn't they? You couldn't know it was him.'

'The one who tortured me most, I've got him in my mind. Blue eyes. I can still see those eyes in front of me.'

'D'you want to kill him?'

'*No, man*. I'd just like to see him, and to find out if his conscience is killing him for what he did.'

'Nah, he's no Immanuel Kant; he's not up to speed with the categorical imperative', replies Dritan. 'He killed his conscience first, and then he came to kill you.'

The car rolls on over the tarmac through the fields.

After a bit, Dritan – who seems to have taken one concept from being a journalist, to never stop asking questions – asks: ‘How did you shoot the film about Ferdonija?’

With characteristic modesty, Gazi says: ‘Oh, I just left the camera there. She sat there, no need for acting. *Voila*. I told her: do what you want, or do nothing at all.’ He takes a left turn, and goes on: ‘I did it like a private shoot – I don’t know, a video just for her. No improvisation, no performance. *Cinéma vérité.* Just real life.’

‘Terrible life’, declares Dritan. ‘It’s terrible what happened to her.’

Only the Gods of myth could devise such a universal suffering, wrote Dritan, in a text with an inter-textual title, *Monologue on this Side of the Grave*, which he published a few days ago. But after that nod to divine pre-destination he writes that it wasn’t gods, neither Parcae nor Moirai, who contrived this tragedy, but people. *Such a drama, focused on the heart of a woman who has lost her family, is always being enacted, now and forever. It wasn’t the gods who devised such a fate for her; no, it was people who thrust the flame of suffering and misery into this woman’s breast*. Talking about the film *Ferdonija*, he writes: *The film describes 24 hours in the life of this woman. The rhythm of her life runs contrary to the rhythm of the society of which she is a part. While Kosovan society races towards the future, Ferdonija burrows into the past, because that is where her life is, there are her days of happiness. Whereas her present, twenty years of it now, is pain and waiting and loneliness.*

She sits and waits. And as she waits, everything happens inside her, while nothing happens outside. One’s relationship with life depends on fate. Some savour it, some suffer it. She sits and weeps. In the form of the weeping rock of Greek myth. Niobe’s tears are the most famous tears of all time and all the world. Her pain was great, and so her tears were endless.

Ovid tells us, and before him Sappho, that Niobe was an acquaintance of Leto, one of Zeus’ lovers. Though Niobe and her husband were mortal, they had fourteen children while Leto only had two: the daughter of Tantalus had seven boys and seven girls, the daughter of Titan just a boy and a girl. All mothers boast about their children, and Niobe made the same mistake. Though she didn’t mention their quality, she made a false step by mentioning their quantity: I’ve got fourteen and you’ve only got two! She said it in jest, but the consequences were grave. Her acquaintance was

stung, embarrassed, angered, disturbed. She told those two children of hers, and they took up their bows and arrows and went off to exact revenge. Her son killed the seven sons, her daughter the seven daughters. For seven days Niobe wept ceaselessly over their bodies. Zeus heard her lament and, not having a heart of stone, he showed himself merciful by turning Niobe into stone. Though turned to stone, she didn't stop crying. (*O Niobe, with what sad eyes I gazed upon thee turned to stone!*) From that day to this, the outcrop on Mount Sipylus has been known as the *Weeping Rock*.

In Kosova this myth can be read as a fairy story, with just a few numbers changed.

Once upon a time there was a woman who lived happily with her husband. Her happiness only increased with the birth of children. She brought four boys into the world. She oversaw weddings for the first two of them. She knew great joy; it touched the heavens. In her happiness she declared: enough, for life could not get any better. But the heavens grew jealous of her joy, and they turned dark and began to pour down rain. Certain baleful spirits appeared, wearing balaclavas, and they took from her her husband and her four children. The mother and her daughters-in-law sat waiting for their return. After six years, just two of them came back, in nylon sacks. The daughters-in-law returned weeping to their homes, and the mother, such was her grief, was turned to stone. As a woman of stone she no longer tasted anything, but sat with rock-like resolution awaiting her husband and her other children. The story goes that the rock is weeping yet.

Hang on, though. A fairy story can't be quite so terrible; it can't possibly end like that. They should return. There should be a happy ending. Either they come back alive, or it's not a fairy story.

Gazi takes a turning off Anton Çetta street, the street of the great conciliator, and stops at the iron gate of a house with a plaque outside, gold letters on black: *Traditional House of the Qerkezi Family. Historical Museum 1999*.

We're soon inside. And just when I've given up all hope of ever finding her in textual form, right here in Gjakova another Niobe appears before my eyes. When it comes to it, myths are nothing other than primordial generalizations that now and then take concrete form in real life. Like this woman, whom I first saw in a documentary fifteen years ago when I was a student. At the One World festival. As its director told me later, the film's title was a bit sentimental: *Icon of Tears*. But the film-making was driven by

pure and humane sentiments, by a sense of shared suffering, something natural for any normal human and essential for an artist. Asked in a 2005 interview why he'd chosen this subject, Ilir, director of the first film about Ferdonija, replied: *Many people have asked me this. The answer's always the same. No one in my family has disappeared; no one's commissioned this film; no one's paid me for it. But I felt the pain of these people of ours and I wanted to do something for them.* So, it's identifying with the afflicted that makes one want to help them. Even if it's only a film it can have popular impact, through the sense of shared suffering that won *Icon of Tears* the prize awarded by the public rather than the jury prize. The film mixes different voices, but the most moving is of course the mother's; she appears intermittently, according to the informative and emotive needs of the piece. Beside the protagonists' monologues and the explication by the narrator, which sounds artificial, other parts have the spontaneity of documentary: she puts the shoes of the missing in a bag; she describes the arrival of the militiamen, and how they went through everyone's identity papers and pulled out eleven of the men (her husband, she says, was a good man, reasonable, hard-working; her eldest son had been handsome and liked to dress smartly; her second son had finished high school and liked history; the third was three years through high school; the fourth was in sixth grade and had joined a karate club, and in the first year had won his white belt and the next year his yellow); she speaks of her impatience to see her husband and her boys as soon as possible, and tells how she went to her husband's uncle to ask his advice, and how his wife – trying to console her, of course – said *they probably just want to stop them working for three months, and then they'll let them go* (Ferdonija says the three months seemed long, but she never imagined they'd stretch into six years); in her dreams she always sees that they'll be coming home – in one dream her husband said that they were in prison but would be freed; at first she was stronger, but now each day seems harder; the best days are when she joins a protest, because for once she feels she's actually doing something, and the protest gives her strength because it raises her hopes of hearing news of them (no matter what the day's like, come rain or shine, she marches with her friends); then her comrades come back to her place and one of them, Menduha, two of whose sons are missing, says: *If God the almighty has written that one of them is alive, let it be one of hers, because we've got one at least*. Then Donja straightens the veils of her daughters-in-law, who've gone back to

their families now they've seen that the boys aren't coming home alive. Then she sits to rest, and rocks the cradle in which she'd hoped to rock her granddaughters and grandsons. At the end, she faces the camera – and, no doubt, the director standing behind it – and explains why she can't stop the tears. If they'd gone abroad for good it would be easier, but when people say *hopefully some day they'll return their bones at least*, that sounds… After a moment she adds: *they took them alive and I wait for them to return alive*… Then, in a different segment, she waters the flowers in the yard of the dead – sorry, of the missing.

In an interview the director says: *I want to show how a person who loses everything finds the strength to live and to bear witness. Her testimony is important.*

When the film was shown in Glasgow, a Swede called Gita came up to the director to congratulate him and told him that, as a result of the film, as a mother she would never scold her daughter whatever her daughter did, but would just rejoice that she was alive. The film had transformed her, made her realize that staying alive was the most important thing. Everything else, every little spat between mother and daughter, between parent and child, or between states, could be resolved. It was enough just to stay alive. Where there's life there's hope.

Whereas when the film was shown in Qatar, the audience – sympathetic to the mother who had lost her family but not her mind – had just repeated: *Subhanallah, Subhanallah! Glory be to God.*

If ever Ferdonija became convinced that they were dead, no doubt she'd more cheerfully die herself to join her husband and her sons; but she is resolved to live on to keep alive both her hopes and their memory. It's as if, at the moment of their parting, her husband had said to her Hamlet's words to Horatio, just making the singular a plural:

If thou didst ever hold us in thy heart
absent thee from felicity awhile,
and in this harsh world draw thy breath
in pain, to tell our story.

Accordingly, Ferdonija took the words and accepted them as a dying wish, and undertook to fulfil them. From right after the war she began

ritually to tell the story, the story she felt the world should know, repeating it as often as was necessary for it to become public knowledge.

She isn't an actor, but fate has cast her in a role: the role of the woman who waits. Her home is her theatre, where for twenty years now she has played the part of Niobe in her own monodrama, and thousands of spectators have seen it: journalists, interviewers, politicians, interpreters, actors, directors, camera people, photographers, historians, sporting figures, relatives, citizens of every country and diverse societies. She narrates, she presents, she experiences the same tragedy for different people. When she's done, they all want to be photographed with her: the President, the Prime Minister, ministers, mayors, business leaders, artists, sportspeople… and they go away as at the end of a play, some touched, some tearful, some as cold as the lemons in her refrigerator. Some even leave disappointed because she hasn't managed to squeeze out a tear. They've heard that at the premiere and during the run she has often cried, but now in this particular performance she hasn't deigned to produce a single tear. And they start to think that they've travelled all that way, they've given up their valuable time, just to see her show being put on, and she's sent them away dry-handed, not the tiniest particle of a tear. What kind of Niobe doesn't cry?

They don't realize that her lamentation takes two forms: the inner lament and the outer. They don't realize that up on Mount Sipylus, sometimes the tears of the petrified Niobe dry up.

Unlike Pashka, who didn't agree to put on a show for others, who only ever put on a premiere, without repeats or audience, Ferdonija has become a media icon. You can see her on all kinds of channels and shows. You can get in touch via social media. You can visit her. You can express your condolences for her inconsolable pain.

She plays the part naturally, but some visitors want adjustments. Could you look out the window a moment? She turns her head that way. Could you clutch your handkerchief with both hands, in your lap, like this? She closes her eyes and clasps her hands around the white handkerchief. Could you look like you're remembering? She has a go. Could you get up and look at the photos on the wall? She gets up. Could you move a bit further along? She moves. Could you touch your son's shoes? She touches them. Could you go into Artan's room and stop in front of his marital bed? She goes in and she stops. Now, what about Armend's? She goes into the other room, stops in front of Armend's marital bed. And then Ardian's. Are those

Edmond’s clothes? She confirms this. Could you get a bit closer to the clothes? She gets closer. The clothes are badly torn and dirty; how could you have known they were his? I just know how happy he was when I bought them for him. Ah, we understand. Could we pop into the next room? She starts off. Could you stop for a moment between the bedrooms, here where we’ve also got the photos on the wall? She stops. The cameras flash constantly. Walk, pose, flash. Walk, pose, flash. Walk, pose, flash. Her legs are getting tired from the walking, her hands and neck are getting tired from the posing, her eyes are getting tired from the flash. But she must obey. This is what they’ve come for. They’ll spread her story. The world will recognize her children. She wants this. She lives for this. So she obeys. Walk, pose, flash. Walk, pose, flash. Walk, pose, flash. It’s making her dizzy; at some point she asks to stop for a moment. That’s enough for today, says the photographer, and puts away the camera. And the tension eases. After a while she gets up from her chair and awaits the applause of her public. But no, there isn’t any public. The audience have dispersed. The bright lights too.

This top-to-bottom calvary, this crucifixion by camera, she endures it daily. But instead of Longinus’s spear, it’s the camera lenses that open her wounds and make her eyes burn.

The journalists and photographers only want a simulation of pain, something as theatrical as possible to prompt a public catharsis; they don’t realize that such simulations have the opposite effect. They marginalize the *art of experiencing*, and impose the *art of representation*. They bewilder her with their flashes and their spotlights, and they suppress her *emotional memory*.

Only once they’ve all gone can she take a deep breath, escape from the role defined for her by others, and re-enter the role defined for her by God. And this role is true; this role represents her – her condition, her appearance. A performance without a public is a performance of her true self.

As a reaction against these manipulations of human suffering, Gazi had decided to shoot his documentary without any imposition. He visited her, he helped her any way he could, sometimes he ate, drank and slept there. They went into town together, drank coffee, spoke of everyday things, sometimes went to a restaurant on the outskirts and had lunch together. In some ways he became her son. And this adoption wasn’t at her request, but his

willingness. The willingness of someone who had suffered at the hands of the paramilitaries and felt solidarity with a mother who had likewise suffered. He left his camera running to capture the real Donja, not the acting Donja. He often put the camera down and went for a cigarette outside, so that she'd feel really free. With her taking insulin every day, he didn't want to be saying 'look that way because you look nicer', or 'hold your hands like this'. No. The camera would simply record what it was pointing at, and she would simply behave as the mood took her. If she felt like getting up to look at a photo, he might not even be there, but the camera would be and would capture her spontaneity. He treated the camera like a fisherman who casts his hook and comes back later to see if by chance he's caught anything.

If she wanted to watch an Indian or Turkish or Spanish soap opera, he wouldn't try to influence her choice. If she went upstairs, and he happened to be in the house, he'd accompany her ritual with the camera. If she announced she'd arranged a meeting with her sister-in-law, Nesrete, at the *Mothers' Calls* association, he'd go with her. If she wished to go to the graves he'd follow, and stand with the camera as far away as possible, so she could say whatever she wanted to the graves of her own ones.

She somehow directed the film. She only stuck to one rule for directors: there are no rules. Then, from thirty hours of footage shot over two years, he and a friend cut down as much as possible until they had a half-hour film. Just as she wasn't fazed by directors' rules, nor was she fazed by the title: *Ferdonija*. It was as much as to say: the film is of Ferdonija, for Ferdonija, by Ferdonija.

Because the film wasn't a film, an artifice, but really a video, a video of the real, public reaction was mixed. [Meanwhile, a few days after our visit, the film would be shown in Belgrade, where – if one listened to the media – there were going to be protestors trying to block the showing. The documentary would be broadcast on 30 May 2019 in Belgrade, and the next day *Koha Ditore* newspaper would publish an article under the title: *Ferdonija's pain blasts Belgrade*. I would order a coffee and begin to read it: 'The thirty minutes of the film *Ferdonija* revealed to Belgrade the pain of a woman who lost her husband and four sons in the last war in Kosova. The documentary by Gazmend Bajri and Shkurte Dauti, shown as part of the *Mirëdita, dobar dan!* – Good morning! – Festival, was opposed by violent protestors who tried to block the showing. But inside the viewing

hall, the story of Ferdonija and of other women who lost family members stirred strong emotions.' The article would be accompanied by two photographs. One above and to the right would show the film in the hall, with the caption: *The documentary shows a day in the life of Ferdonija, and the appeals by other mothers on behalf of their missing, in this year's edition of the festival*. The other, below and to the left, would show police behind a grille: *A heavy police presence stopped protestors getting into the viewing hall where the documentary was being shown. They were there in greater numbers than for the festival's opening day. As a result, the audience had to remain inside Dorćol Platz Dobračina 59 until the protestors were dispersed by Serbian police*. In contrast to the protestors, one Serb in the audience would say: *The documentary made me very emotional, because I'm a mother and I well understand this woman's suffering. Every mother feels that pain and it has nothing whatever to do with nationalism or with ethnic identity*. For this viewer with the pleasant name of Jelena, would it be two emotions coming together – fear and compassion – or just one, compassion? Jelena would *well understand this woman's suffering*, because *every mother feels that pain*. Ferdonija is a mother, Jelena is a mother. Ferdonija is on the stage, Jelena is in the audience. Two women, from two countries at odds. Still the catharsis occurs. Pain is human, not national. This *has nothing whatever to do with nationalism*, and so the audience suffered along with the actor. Thus, without any simulations, without contrived scenes, the film touches an audience that, from the perspective of nationality, is the same as those who caused the tragedy, but from the perspective of humanity is different or distanced from them. What does Jelena see?]

A black and white film. A film without music. A film about loneliness, grief, waiting. The first section shows Ferdonija asleep, and we hear her snoring and the tick-tock of the clock on the wall. Then there's a dog barking, the yard, the empty clothes-line in it, and the clock chimes. An Aeschylian title appears: *Ferdonija*. A solitary flower in a pot. Ferdonija takes her daily dose of insulin. She stands in the kitchen, lost in thought. Her right elbow is propped on the table, the hand pressed to her face. She waits. The kettle boils for tea. On TV the state broadcaster is showing basketball. She eats; she drinks her tea. Only the ambient noise, no other sound. Then she watches an Indian soap, and gives a running commentary. She remarks that the music is very sad, and starts to explain: the woman

who’s crying is crying for her son; they’ve told her he’s dead, but in fact they’ve kidnapped him. She says that the characters have very complicated names. She says that at first the episodes were *loads nicer*, but now they’re heavier. But she’s been drawn in, because she wants to find out who’s going to win: the ones who are suffering, or… Then we see her going out of the house and closing the door to the yard. She’s going to a demonstration with friends and fellow-sufferers, on the occasion of 8th March, the Day of Mothers. While the film shows the faces of the mothers, sisters and daughters of the missing, and of others who have joined the protest in solidarity, we hear the voice of someone making a speech: *we want them to come back to us, even if in the end this means in a coffin, just let us have them beside us, let us find consolation, let us place a vase of flowers at their graves*. A guy takes photos, the mothers put flowers on a board covered with photos fixed to the fence around the Kosova Parliament. We see the grieving, stunned faces of the mothers. Then Ferdonija’s in her sitting room drinking coffee with a friend, telling her that she saw a programme showing how animals help other animals, while she despairs that human animals just attack other human animals. The tick-tocking of the clock. The photographs of the dead come into focus, and then their shoes, from Halim’s to Edmond’s. Then she sleeps again. In the next section we see her climbing the stairs to the office of the *Mothers’ Calls* association. She’s out of breath, complains at the number of stairs, says the office is very high up and it’s the last time she’s coming. Inside she meets her friends. One of them’s tapping at a computer, another’s re-telling the story of the person she’s lost. Ferdonija tells her story, and then asks Suphija to read it back to her. When she gets to the bit where they take her children from her, she bursts into tears. Three words more and then Suphija gives way too. They weep together. One reads through tears, the other listens through sobs. Ferdonija recounts how her husband told her to be strong, whatever happened. She says she’s keeping going for their sake. Vlora meanwhile, talking about the loss of her husband Shpëtim, says that the worst curse you could inflict on anyone is that you might lose the love of your life. Ferdonija’s sister-in-law Nasrete, who’s been left without her son Albion, says it’s not easy to go on for sixteen years like this, in these surroundings, but here they can soothe the pain of losing loved ones, with their pictures on the walls. Ferdonija adds that she’s surprised when people say they can’t look at photos of missing family members. She feels that if she were to take away the

pictures it would be like completely erasing her beloved. She declares that life is very long, *but very short when it comes to happiness.* Suphija complains that no one wants someone who's grieving. People keep clear of women who talk about those they've lost, about their grief. So *you have to change the subject*. In the subsequent section, there's a TV in the room. Ferdonija has provided the tape of her sons' wedding. The ceremony – and the filming – was on June 20th 1998; so, a Saturday. Then we see her in a car going to the graves. There are some flowers at the gate to the cemetery, and the national flag waves overhead, and the marble gravestones are getting paler. She tidies the graves, and talks to them. She tells her first two sons that their brides have re-married and had children. She tells the two younger sons about friends of theirs who've married. She tells her youngest about something that surprises her: she remembers his friends being fourteen years old or thereabouts, like him, but now they're getting on for thirty. It's only her boy who's not getting any older. Finally, the tick-tock of the clock again, and five photographs, this time from Edmond to Halim. All born on different days; all gone in one day. Saturday.

It's also Saturday when we find ourselves visiting Ferdonija. It's the first week of April. Everything reinforces the idea of a house transformed, from a cheerful chamber piece with eight characters into a painful monodrama with one miserable mother. Out in the yard, the flowers are opening as if nothing had happened:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire…

Now, twenty years after the war, in this April noon, she still clings to a thread of hope; she's like someone hanging onto a strand of straw until the sea overwhelms them.

Are you from Macedonia? she asks me, and I'm amazed how my accent gave me away in just a few words of greeting. *Near there*, I say. *I knew it*, she says; *you sound different*. I feel a bit embarrassed, perhaps because in that moment the three of them seem to be speaking one language while I speak another, a *different* language.

She tells us that at first she found it hard to talk, when clever people were visiting her, *people with schooling, with university*. She didn't know how to

talk *with grammar*, she mixed up the words. They'd all heard about her character, the woman of stone, and now that the stone was alive they wanted to hear her speak. Gradually she began to realize that the visitors listening to her weren't interested in what was grammatic, but what was dramatic.

It still wasn't easy to perform in front of an audience of presidents, ministers, MPs, teachers, intellectuals… She felt the emotions of any actress making her debut. It was even harder for her, because she wasn't playing the role of someone else, but the role of herself. And so she'd begin, mixing dialect and standard vocabulary, keeping her distinctive strong 'r's, the 'a's that sometimes sound like 'o's, some of the local forms, along these lines: 27th of March 1999 it wahs; better to say, Sarturday… (Ferdonija thus transitions from a Saturday in 2019 to that Saturday in 1999.) Arll the family, we wahs in th'house: me, Halim, Arrtan, Arrmend, Arrdian, Edmond, the brrides of the two older boys, and there wahs fifteen guests. So it wahs. Twenty-thrree souls: eleven males – men – and twelve women. A right herrd, squarshed like peas in a pahd, for so it wahs in time of warr. It were sun-up – sparrow-call – it were dawn. A grrey morning it were too.

She stops. It's as if she's gathering herself before descending into the tunnel of her memory. Then she describes how at eleven in the morning, *as we wahs just sitting there, came those swine*, the Serbs, among them the unmistakeable Vuk and Dragan, crowding round the entrance to the basement and ordering everyone out. They asked who they all were, and Halim answered, introducing them in turn. This is Shpëtim, my big brother's friend, this is his mother, this is Skender, this is his wife, this is Murteza, this is his wife, this is his daughter, this is Fatos and this is Shpend, they're her children… Enough! Dragan had yelled, because it had started drizzling, and he didn't plan on turning into mush listening to all the names. He'd made a gesture to his comrades and they'd gone away. Everyone had been holding their breath, and now they gasped, gazing at each other. Each as pale as the rest. *We're safe*, they said. Just how *safe*, they were shortly to find out. At three in the afternoon the same militia unit were back, Dragan and Vuk among them, and they dragged everyone out again. They took their identity papers and left them standing an hour in the rain, until they got back from the militia station where supposedly they were checking the papers. Then they were back again. They ordered Artan

to bring out the Opel Kadett, and then ordered everyone into the basement. *They demarnded raki, but Halim said there wahsn't none.* You've got some, course you've got some; where there's a kebab there's a raki, Dragan replied. True, said Halim, but this time we don't. Hmm. *They'z looking crahss, and then Dragan calls to Arrdian*. You're a waiter, aren't you? he said; so fetch some water. Then he turned to Ferdonija and gave her a packet of coffee and ordered her to make some.

In the middle of recounting, at the moment when she mentions coffee she says suddenly: Darn! I forgot. Would a coffee do you? Gazi and I, immersed in her story, are as startled as if someone on TV had spoken to us. But Dritan, who looks like he needs a break from the tragedy, says to her: please, that would really hit the spot. We other two glare at him, uncomfortable that she's going to have to get up to make coffee for us, but as if she wasn't there he says: easy, lads; she needs to move about, or she'll get cramp stuck in one place. And he laughs. Ferdonija laughs too. Gazi gets up and says: you stay there, I'll do it. But Dritan insists: I want a coffee from this lady, not from you. Gazi sits again, and she gets up, smiling, and makes the coffee. I've barely got the cup to my lips when she picks up where she left off.

She describes how as she was going up the stairs to make coffee, she let out a groan. One of the militiamen heard and asked her why she was groaning. She didn't reply. He told her not to be afraid of them, because they'd come to protect her. *Well for God's sake!* Then Dragan had found a table and some chairs. And there they sat, drinking and talking, while the rest had gazed anxiously at the clock, which seemed to have stopped, as if the hands too were too frightened to move. At five in the afternoon they started to call out names: Fatos Jetishi, Shpend Jetishi, Skender Dylhasi, Murteza Dylhasi, Shpëtim Ymeraga, *oh and then* Kasim's son Vegim and *mine too*: Halim, Artan, Armend, Ardian and Edmond. When they called Edmond's name there was no answer. Edmond had fallen asleep, and his mother had to go and wake him.

They went through checking the identity papers against a list, but one was missing. Ferdonija told them they'd got all of them, except that Edmond didn't have the Serbian *lična karta* because he'd only turned fourteen a few weeks before.

They came and took arll the gold jewel'ry the young women had, and left. And then they were back with marsks on, demarnding money. At first

Ferdonija had refused to give them money, but when they started yelling she reached into her blouse and gave them five hundred marks. Then one of them put his knife to Dudije's throat, and another threatened Murteza's wife Edi, telling them to hand over the money or he'd kill her daughter. Genta, just two years old, stared uncomprehending at the gun barrel pressing against her forehead, and didn't move. So the women reached into their coats and pulled out whatever money they had, and those who didn't have anything begged and pleaded. After they took away the men, the money and the jewellery, one of the militiamen looked at the clock and told the women they had ten minutes to get ready and then they should bugger off to Albania.

They scrabbled their clothes together and set off, but when they got to Halim's kebab house they were stopped by some more militia, who demanded to know where they were going. They said they'd been evicted. They were told to go back again: no one would bother them. So they were being bounced between two fires and – not daring to go back home – they went to stay in a different house.

The next day Ferdonija and her two daughters-in-law had gone to their home, hoping that some of the men might have come back. But the place was deserted. No men, no boys; no one had come back. So she asked her youngsters: *where do you want to take yourselves?* They replied: *wherever you go, we're with you*.

Ferdonija went to her brother, Muharrem, with them and stayed with him for a time. After ten days, she and his wife went to the police station to ask about the men who'd been taken, but they told her: *we don't know what happened to them*. Her brother-in-law Kasim knew Vuk, *the actor*, and took her to his house in the Qerim district. They found Dragan there too, and he told them: *they went to Koshare to fight*. Ferdonija replied: *my boys haven't done their military service; they don't know how to fight*. He didn't reply. Ferdonija begged them, even if they'd decided not to tell where the boys had been sent, at least to pass some medicine to Halim, because he had heart trouble. *Don't fret*, they told her, *they've got all the medicine they need*.

Like thaht, they took my family away and made them disappear for ever. If I'd known I'd never see them again, who knows… Her tears won't let her finish, or perhaps there was nothing to finish. Who knows?

In 2005, they returned (*oh, don't say the bones!*) her eldest and youngest sons. She buried them at Çabrat. But of Halim, Armend and Ardian, nothing is known. *We've got their graves ready, but where are the bodies? Time by time I says: God send that I find them. More often I says: God send that they find me…*

This is the story – with additions and gaps, according to need and circumstance – told to everyone, by Ferdonija herself; they've been promising her a guide for the museum-home for years. This is the story she wanted to tell the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall, who hugged her emotionally when they visited, but she didn't know their language. That doesn't matter, because four centuries ago their poet John Donne embodied her pain in verse:

By children's births, and death, I am become
So dry, that I am now mine own sad tomb.

She's given an 'official' version of the story to the *Mothers' Calls* association, and it's been recorded in the monograph of the victims of Gjakova, published in 2015 and only covering the stories of 148 victims who'd lived in the city – meaning the civilized ones.

The *Mothers' Calls* association had decided to register the truth about war crimes against Gjakovars for the archives, recording the stories of families who'd lost *those most beloved*. The association's office became a narrator, and it's not hard to imagine the scene: ten fingers clasping, cracking, flickering and stopping, ready to work. The mouth opens, the story begins. It's a story with tears and tempests. The fingers tap at the keyboard. Bursts of firing are heard across the city. Lives that were extinguished are revived now. Here, on the white page on the screen, a whiteness of paradise. The stories become a procession. In that same chair sit mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, sons and daughters one after another and they talk, they fall silent, they weep, they bear witness. Their tales are frequently interrupted by tears, half of them hidden behind dot-dot-dot…

The story of Magbule: *That first night, 24th March 1999, when NATO was bombarding Serb lines, sometime after midnight, they came in a show of revenge – paramilitaries, militia, soldiers and other people in masks – they barged into the hall of our building and turned the lights out. First they*

ordered us all outside, and they kept Izet back. I begged them, told them I'd give them all the money I had, if they'd just leave my husband alone…

The story of Antigona: *Our house was right in the heart of the Great Bazaar, and flames and smoke began to get closer to us. As soon as he saw the flames, my husband Gazmend went out and started helping to put out the fires in the burning buildings…*

The story of Kasim: *My only son, Vegim, had a happy childhood in our family, with his parents and five sisters. He spent a lot of time at Halim, my brother's, playing with his four boys. Something like thirty people were sheltering at my brother's. My son only went to look for a bit, but the neighbourhood was surrounded and he never came back…*

The story of Dukagjin: *From our house they killed my parents and they took away my three brothers and our brother-in-law and his son. Later we found out they'd killed all of them…*

The story of Sanija: *Dozens of militia and soldiers and paramilitaries took us hostage. They were hitting me with their fists and their boots, and my son Fidan, they put a knife to his throat…*

The story of Afrim: *My daughter Yllka grew up in a very patriotic atmosphere. She was active at school, in humanitarian groups and so forth, wherever she saw the need. She did courses to help those wounded in the fighting, and she practised using weapons and maintaining them and eventually she joined 137 Brigade. She was killed, along with some other soldiers, in an attack during the Battle of Çabrat…*

The story of Nesrete: *I heard the voice of my daughter, Arjeta, yelling: 'Mum, they've grabbed the boys!' She'd seen them through the window being dragged out of the yard, their hands up, and being taken away…*

The story of Nesrete begets the story of Vjollca, and the story of Vjollca begets the story of Ferdeze, and the story of Ferdeze begets the story of Edi, and the story of Edi begets the story of Ferdonija… and her observers' own sorrows are stilled, just as the visitors' eyes are stilled before the rock in Manisa that represents a mythical tragedy, where a mythical Greek mother has turned into the archetype of maternal grief. Any mother that loses a child in tragic circumstances is compared to her. For anyone who loses a loved one, she serves as an icon of consolation. She's portrayed as the apogee of suffering in the *Iliad*, too. When Priam, devastated by grief for his dead son, goes to the killer to beg for the return of the body, Achilles prepares Hector's bier and, as he invites the old man to supper, he offers

consolation by recalling the fate of Niobe – in other words, he suggests that things could be worse:

For the present let us prepare our supper.
Even lovely Niobe had to think about eating.

Our Niobe, the Niobe of Gjakova, lost all her children and her husband. But as Homer puts it, *even she had to think about eating*. Except she couldn't eat without her sons and without her husband. And since she couldn't eat without them, she resolved to eat with them. According to this contemporary legend, for six years running she's laid the table with six place-settings: one for herself, five for them. They're no longer there, but in her mind they've all been having lunch, as always. The room would be full of the sound of laughter and spoons on plates. Halim, just opposite her, would be saying *we're hard workers, and God doesn't forget a hard worker*; Artan would be saying *as soon as things calm down I'm going to Switzerland, to make enough money to buy a good car, we'll have a fine time going around in it*; Armend: *and me too right after you, God willing*; Ardian complains *these customers of Dad's in the bar are getting right up my nose, they eat and they drink and I get worn out running around after them and they never pay*, and Ferdonija replies *never mind, one of these days they'll pay good and proper, count on it*, and Edmond licks his spoon and says *if we all go, who's going to protect Kosova?*

Each day they turn up at lunchtime like this, as ghosts, as guests, or as ghostly guests in their own home. *A guest is a ghost, a ghost is a guest.* And our Niobe knows that we're all ghosts, we're all shadows, we're all guests in this life. But when they get up from the table in front of her, and she's left alone in the room, the tears overwhelm her.

When in 2005 the bodies of Artan and Edmond were recovered, when she got back from burying them she removed two settings from the table. The next day there were two plates missing. And then the lunch of the shadows ceased. She took away the other three settings, because she knew that Halim, Armend and Ardian wouldn't appear without the other two, because she'd ask them how they let themselves get separated from her oldest and her youngest, and they wouldn't be able to face that, or wouldn't know what to say to her.

She pushes aside her own plate untouched, and puts it in the kitchen. Her slippers drag down the hallway, out into the yard, and she sits on the steps and waits. Some look at her and think: all that she's gone through, there can't be much more left to go. Others look at her and see a myth who lives forever.

Edmond! Mondi! Wait up! She hears the voice and looks up. But it's someone calling their friend. Was it Edmond, Armond or Edon? She can't be sure. Anyway, a shout like that is enough to bring back the last words she said to her boy, when the militia were asking for him and he was asleep. *Get up, lambkin!* And she goes on talking to herself, as if her son were there: *How did you drop off like that, my lamb? How can you sleep at a time like this? We're all shivering in fright, and you're out like a light.*

In her mind's eye she sees the sleeping face of her son, and who knows what blissful dreams he's enjoying? Should she wake him? Should she shatter his dreams? They're waiting and they're only going to get more vicious. He's so deeply asleep, as if he doesn't want to wake. Mond… Mondi! Slowly his eyelids open. Up you get, lambkin! It's as if she's saying: up you get and go and die for a bit. Just for a moment; forty winks. She touches his hair; his face. He's awake. They're calling for you too, my darling baby. She wants to tell him not to be afraid, but she knows no son of hers would be afraid. He gazes at them, back at his mother, and then the others again, and he goes to them.

She opens her eyes and sees some of the kids from the neighbourhood through the fence, and she smiles as some vague image flickers across her mind. The sun warming her face is making her sleepy.

The boys are there, looking at her and laughing. Wake up Mum, don't worry, there's no war here! She touches their bodies: they're unharmed, their clothes white and pristine. Flowers and sunbeams all around. She touches each of the faces, and tells Edmond: tuck your jumper in, my lamb, or you'll catch a chill in your innards. He laughs and says: you can't catch cold here Mummy. She has two sons on her left, two on her right. She looks, and in front of her she sees her husband, smiling. He takes her by the hand, and she follows, and looks around and says: there's a draught. The boys'll catch a chill. He laughs: don't fret! It's the fresh breeze of paradise. No one catches a chill here. She smiles and looks at her children: why are they all dressed in white? You're a tailor: make them some nice outfits, all different colours. Our boys ought to be the smartest even among the angels.

He smiles, and together they begin to dance the *waltz of the blessed*. Oh God, I've missed you all so much, she says, gazing at her laughing children, and at that moment she wakes up. The neighbourhood kids are laughing in the alley.

She goes indoors. She climbs the stairs, enters one of the bedrooms and sits looking at Edmond's clothes.

Make the best of them! she says to him.

He looks at the clothes, laughs, and jumps about like a little lamb.

Do these trainers suit me, or what?

Everything suits you, my lambkin.

Mond! Mondi! yell the children from the alley.

I'm going out, he says; we're playing football. My friends are going to be so jealous when they see my tracksuit and my trainers.

You're never at home, my pet. It's like you're afraid the place'll bite you.

Mondi laughs, and howls like a wolf, and kisses his mother and runs out of the room, flying down the stairs and away. While his mother is still saying 'Careful, or you'll get sunb-' he's in the alley.

Now his mother sits in front of the clothes, which she washed herself – despite recommendations that they should be disinfected by specialists. She washed them, she dried them, she put them in transparent bags and she hung them in the glass-fronted cupboard in her son's room. *Turns out the clothes last longer than the person*, she says.

In another part of Kosova they have a saying 'May you wear them well and wear them out!' It seems like a curse on the clothes, but it's goodwill to the person, that they live longer than their clothes. But up there on high, the Parcae, the Valkyries, the immortals, God, they decided otherwise. They don't bother with threads of clothing but with threads of life, which they cut when they will.

For a time God was more open-handed. He let the first human live for 930 years, another even longer – 962 years – and that one's grandson was allowed to live for 969 years; but Mondi didn't even get fifteen. When they were celebrating his fourteenth birthday on the 9th of February 1999, they all repeated the traditional blessing *May you have one hundred years!*, not thinking that at least in their blessings they could have been a bit more generous: May you have 200 years! 500 years! 1000! May you… may you live forever! But no, that would be blasphemy, and God wouldn't put up with it. *May you have one hundred years* sounded like a curse. This was the

very least they might have asked, bearing in mind that people once lived for more than 900 years; and not even this minimum wish was taken into account. A few weeks later Mondi departed, like more than a thousand other children killed in that war. Thus it had been written: that he should not have fifteen years. Today, twenty years on, he's still the same age as when they took him away. His mother tries to imagine what he'd look like today. Taller? Yes, of course. Filled out? Yes, a bit, but not much – he was always sporty. Glasses? No, no. Hair thinning yet? No, no. Perhaps a beard, like the faces of the three young men who were sitting in front of her today? Please God no. Perhaps a bit like… perhaps… who knows? maybe better to remember him as he was.

She moves into the next room, touches more clothes, and then takes down one of her husband's jackets and looks at the photo of him on the wall. And he is smiling at his wife, and as he stands there in front of her it's almost as if he's showing off, proud that the clothes he sewed with his own hands have lasted longer than he has. They say that people are tougher than rocks, but they didn't know that Halim's suits are tougher than people.

She sits on the bed and looks at the clothes. Her vision clouds, her body sags. She feels as though she's getting sleepy. A little while later she feels her son's hand, hears his voice calling to her to come and play hide-and-seek. Later, my lambkin, because I'm worn out. Now, now! he insists. My lamb, you're a big boy now; too old for that game. No, Mummy, open your eyes and see how small I am. She opens her eyes. He really does seem small, no more than five. He tells his mother to close her eyes, and he hurries off. She counts: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5… and opens her eyes. She hunts high and low through the house, everywhere. She looks behind doors, under tables, in beds, by the stairs, through cupboards. Nowhere. When she grows tired of looking, she comes back breathing heavily to ask the others if they've seen him. There's no one there. Where have they got to? Halim! Artan! Armend! Ardian! Where's Mond? Where are you all? She searches the rooms, the hallways, the yard. They're nowhere to be found. Where did they go? How did they vanish off the face of the earth? she wonders. How could they all just disappear?

She sits on the doorstep and waits.

She sits like this for twenty years. Two are found, three are left to wait for. Through all these twenty years the sitting room has stayed the same. The furniture is just as it was the day her sons and her husband were

snatched away. The display cases, the side-tables, the divans, the stools, the clock on the wall, the television, the chest of drawers, the stove; they're all still there. It's a new TV set, but it's in the same place, beside a smaller screen connected to a camera by the front door which covers the yard. The dining table is near the kitchen, and the kitchen is arranged just as it was the day she was left alone. Donja doesn't want to move the furniture and the other bits and pieces around, afraid that her memories would grow fainter. By not moving anything, she has said to time: Stop! Stop where you are, for you terrify me.

By stopping time she has preserved her memories. Within the memories her children and her husband live on, and she too with them, happy.

Only the walls have changed: they're covered with photographs of all different sizes, perspectives, colours and occasions; with the figures of the family, the last remnant of which can be found both inside the frames and outside them, here with us.

Going into her house today is like going back in time. Uneasy at the passing of the years, she has taken shelter in the citadel of her memory. The years turn: one, two, three… ten… twenty. But she's decided to count on the spot, a spot in the year 1999. The 27th of March, to be exact. She's afraid that it'll turn into another day, the 28th of March 1999 – and don't even think about 2019. Her sons and her husband exist until March 27th, and why should she have to be parted from them and proceed alone into March 28th, or through the years and decades to follow? They did not reach the new century, and so she rejects the present day. Either she exists with all of them, or she will not exist at all. She clambers aboard the vessel of memory, she crosses the River Acheron, and she goes and talks with the Shades of Hades. Their advice is this: a person lives as long as they are remembered. Her blessing is thunderous: you shall all live forever. I won't let you die. She returns, wearied but resolved to fulfil her mission: I will do whatever it takes for you never to be forgotten; I will turn the house into a museum!

In the first weeks and months following the war, she still couldn't believe in the possibility of her husband and sons dying. She saw them going out into the road, disappearing at the corner. *Death is a bend in the road,/ to die is to sleep out of view,* as it was once put by a poet who didn't like being viewed. They exist somewhere, round the corner, it's just that I can't see them, she thinks. Death is the dark side of life, and the world of the dead is

called Hades: that which is unseen, not unexisted. Those who moved away from the visible world of Zeus entered the invisible world of his big brother, Hades. That's to say they were, but they just weren't visible. Her husband and her boys likewise existed somewhere, but they couldn't be seen. Anyone who's out of our sight is a little dead – is someone who's turned the bend in the road. A telephone call, a message, or just a word from them, or from someone who's seen them, is all it takes to put our minds at rest. But she remained restless, because she'd had no news of them, where they were and how they were.

In the first days and weeks, in her sleep she would reach out an unconscious arm to touch her husband, and when it only touched empty bedclothes her eyes – still asleep – would fill with tears. When she was neither awake nor asleep she would think that her children were sleeping in their rooms upstairs. When their wives rose in the morning, she would wait for her sons to come down too. The hands of the clock would turn, and still they did not come down. She would drink coffee with her daughters-in-law, in silence and expectation.

The days passed and each day was harder and darker. Until that black day, when two of her sons came back to her and broke her heart.

It's turned my house into a ruin, said a friend who'd been left horribly alone.

It's turned my house into a grave, said another made wretched by grief.

It's turned my house into a museum, said Ferdonija, clutching the approval from the Ministry in her hand, pleased that after endless traipsing through offices, after a great deal of effort, she'd managed to find accommodation for her sons and her husband in the collective memory. Then the visitors flocked to the museum: from all over Gjakova, all over Kosova, all over the world. They looked, they talked, they asked and she answered. Then they had their photos taken and left, while she returned to that Saturday of hers in 1999, when the hearth lost its heat and the home turned back into a cold house. But no. She turned the house into a hearth of memories, into a museum, into a *mouseion* where the muses might sit and remember.

It's a warm welcome I offer, and it lifts me when they come to visit, she says to the three of us. I realize that the visits are a kind of therapy for her, and I'm grateful to my two friends for bringing me with them on this visit. Unfortunately, I'm no good at condolences. I'll squeeze out a word now,

and manage another next year. But I'm a good listener. And she seems to need people to listen to her story, the story of her children, and then to spread it wherever they go, so the world hears and never forgets their names. *For as long as life is lived*, she says.

Now and for twenty years past she has received visitors on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday, but she only lives on Saturday. The last Saturday in March of the last year of the nineties. She receives and accompanies every day. The whole world visits her, everyone but her sons. It's them she lives for. For her, other people are what her life means, and the means of prolonging the lives of her sons and her husband.

She dwells between the past and the future. She doesn't keep a cat, or a dog, because cats and dogs don't live long, and she's not ready for more losses. She thinks of her children: what were they like and what would they be like? Then she imagines a little, at least to the extent that they hadn't died at the hands of criminals. So far so good. What kinds of death would a mother accept for her children? Death in a traffic accident? God, no! Death from cancer? Never. Death from a heart attack? no. What, then? None of them. She wants her sons to remain untouched by death. Let them live, let them get through their clothes as fast as they like, but never their lives. Life isn't like a shirt. Throw it off once, you can't put it on again. And unfortunately death is closer to us than a shirt.

Ferdonija – Donja – not infrequently finds herself talking happily about the past, and it's only when the present comes back to her that the tears flow. As she talks she remembers their faces and she chuckles. It's a shock to remember that they are no more. Then she starts to cry.

She turns on the television. News. The Dialogue between Kosova and Serbia continues, but they're not discussing anything that interests her. Day by day by week by month by year she waits for something to happen in the dialogue between the states, while in her inner monologue everything is happening. She has no power, so it's natural she has great hopes for those who do. Switching channels one day, she sees and listens to a woman describing the story of her rape. She's called Vasfije Krasniqi Goodman, and she's a survivor of sexual violence. She was sixteen when she was raped, in 1999, and now she's decided to go public with her experience to encourage other raped women, and to show the world that the war didn't end on liberation day. She's using her shocking story like this to give her

twenty thousand sister-sufferers the strength to reveal their own tragedies. When she's finished speaking, Ferdonija turns off the TV, and on the screen she can see herself reflected, wiping her eyes with a handkerchief.

There's only the tick-tock of the clock. No hooves clatter outside. The war took her sons. She had no Doruntina, no daughter of folklore to be brought back to console her; fortune had not willed it so. Ill-fortune had willed enough: it took everything, and left the mother alone. The mother, then forty-eight, has been left like some mythical crone, seeing the *dream of her life* in a blank TV screen. *I saw him in a dream; he said he's in prison*: she remembers the dream from years before, in which her husband – like Aga Ymer in the legend – said he would return. She waited nine years, as in the legend, but reality required an extension of the deadline. She waited nineteen years, and still he did not return from prison. At that point she decided to wait… for the rest of her life.

A lot's happened in Kosova since she got married in 1970: substantive autonomy, the protests of '81, the removal of autonomy on the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosova, the ratcheting up of systematic abuse, decades of patience, a time of rebellion, killings, massacres, expulsions, the intervention by Euro-Atlantic troops, the bombs falling from the sky bom, bom, bom… The front door, bam bam bam. Come out, Halim, we've brought coffee! Oh God… You only bring coffee when there's been a death, thought Ferdonija. Thanks be to God, we're all all right. And yet… soon some of us won't be.

As soon as she starts talking about the war her breathing gets faster. In the re-telling she re-experiences the terror, thinks she can still save her children and her husband, at least in her story. But no. The truth is out, and the truth overcomes her wishes.

She's speaking no more than the truth, as Gazi takes his cup of coffee and sets it on the table near the kitchen, with a silence carved of wood.

This table has only been moved once, when a photographer who had the same name as her eldest insisted on simulating the scene of waiting, re-posing it with an elaborate directorial hand until he contrived to get the photo that has become her second identity card. She had posed, and the scene spoke. You might think she'd started playing a part, but the truth was exactly the opposite: she had never stopped playing a part, because it was a part allotted to her not by man but by God.

Who is God? What is God?

God puts on a show and never shows himself. And we can’t seem to remember what happened in rehearsal. We play ourselves, and we play ourselves but once. Our life is the premiere. A premiere without rehearsal, and so full of mistakes. Performed only once, and so tragedy.

While she’s playing the role of her life, in the house of silence, he at whom she points the finger for the disappearance of her family is playing – like the actor he is – a different role in a theatre in Belgrade. The role of a murderer of children? No, no; he’s already played that outside the theatre. Inside he prefers Shakespearian parts. Especially Macbeth. You need to cut your hair, says the director. Fine, whatever you say. You should dye your hair and your beard; you’ve gone very grey. Fine, whatever you say. Read this extract! He takes it, he looks at it and then he hands the book back; I’ve committed it to memory. Right, perform it for me and my assistant here! He stands amid the scenery. The lights go down. His sleepless eyes protrude, his jaw clenches, his bloody hands reach out:

Whence is that knocking?
How is't with me, when every noise appals me?
What hands are here? ha! they pluck out mine eyes.
Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red.

He moves towards the director, hands like claws drenched in blood. Lights, lights! yells the director. But the actor can’t look at the light; he’s afraid of the public and their applause, and he tries to slip away. He stops. He seems to see Ferdonija in the audience, applauding him sarcastically. Who can play a criminal better than a criminal? The performer races around the stage, but cannot leave it. On four sides are her four sons. He stops still in the middle of the stage, falls to his knees, clutches his head and stares in terror as if someone has appeared on the steps. Is it Duncan? No, it’s Halim, coming near him oh so softly. He lowers his head, cries out, trembles. He feels an unexpected hand on his shoulder. It’s the director’s hand: Vuk, are you all right?

Of course, this rehearsal never happened, but it could have happened if the killers hadn’t killed their consciences. Ferdonija points the finger in

vain. Nesrete points the finger in vain too, and Vjollca with her son. On the television he denies the crimes, defends himself and his brother-in-arms Dragan. Having stood up for his friend, he speaks for himself: *I wouldn't hurt a fly*. What are you up to these days? asks the journalist. *I work on TV, as an actor… a comedian*. It's no surprise that a criminal makes the public laugh. After all, in the classical tetralogies, after the tragedies there was a comedy. That's how it was in the lost *Niobe* of Aeschylus. That's how it is today. History repeats itself.

One fine day, not long after Vuk took away her lambs, a fisherman from the Serbian village of Tekija went fishing in the Danube, and he saw something big. It wasn't a fish, or a shark, or a whale. So what was it? A truck. A refrigerated truck containing eighty corpses.

A few days later, in Lake Perućac, another truck appeared with corpses from Kosova. And some time after that the psychiatric hospital at Toponica admitted a militiaman of section 87 of the Special Police Units, who'd been overcome by a spirit of darkness so deep it couldn't even be alleviated by the light from the lamp he'd made out of an Albanian's skull.

Far from the river, far from the lake, far from the hospital, Ferdonija sat and waited in her museum-home. The hallway is lined with the shoes of her husband and her children. She gets up and touches the smallest. On a shelf is a copy of the Quran. *Through God in whose hands my soul is, the miscarried child would pull his mother with his umbilical cord to paradise if she was patient*. The mother endures for twenty years. She endures, she waits. Hope is the bridge connecting her to her children and her husband. Sometimes a visitor arrives with the intention of destroying the bridge – like the woman from the capital who came and said to her: *you're wasting your time waiting. They killed them the day they took them*. She says nothing; she lets her tears speak, and they say enough. She remembers. A while back, in the tent where they'd laid out clothing from the (no longer) missing, she thought she'd seen Ardian's clothes. So perhaps the visitor was right. But she hadn't seen her boy's body. So perhaps the visitor wasn't right. So another day goes by, another week, another year… time; and sometimes she thinks of them as dead and sometimes she thinks of them as living. Her suffering is an unfinished puzzle. And if one day her two other sons and her husband turn up dead, she'll still hope to meet them again. Because *the more you've gone through, the less you've got left to go.*

If one of them came back alive, it would be heaven for her. And even if she could at least see them again after death, that would still be heaven. For her, heaven isn't some garden strewn with all sorts of beautiful flowers, but a happy emotional condition.

She leafs through an album. Memories are a looking backwards; photographs are emblems of happy moments. Through them, she relives the past. Her house is so full of photos it's like an art gallery.

Photo 1. Date: 16th May 1970. Halim and Ferdonija in wedding outfits. He in black, she in white. He's looking at the camera, while she's looking away somewhere. He seems to be wearing striped leggings, but you can't tell the colour because it's a black and white photo. They'd met three years earlier, and it was love at first sight. He was a lad with curly black hair. She a girl with straight black hair. They both seemed elegant; sympathetic. Sympathetic in the etymological sense too: they had a deep feeling for one another; their love was a shared feeling. For two years apart they managed to keep the flame burning, and then in the June Halim had asked for Ferdonija's hand. Eleven months later he interrupted his studies at Maribor, in Slovenia, and they were married. That day they wound the spring of the clock here, and put it up on the wall. After three more years, he got the train back to Maribor with Ferdonija, for two reasons: to finish his diploma as a designer-tailor, and to get medical attention for his wife because she didn't seem able to get pregnant. Besides Halim's studies and Ferdonija's check-ups, they spent the rest of their time in walks by the river and through the parks, in the cafe and a two-storey house with a yard full of flowers. Every now and then they'd visit a Kosovar silversmith who lived there. His wife had a room full of clothes and still complained she had nothing to wear, while Ferdonija passed the months with just two outfits, content with what she had. It was a time full of love. In the evenings they strolled by the Drava, holding each other, kissing passionately, two shadows in a foreign land far from eyes that knew them. They were free to do whatever their minds decided, whatever their hearts willed. They went to Graz for an ice-cream, to Trieste for a coffee. Then they visited Kasim in Pula, where he was doing his military service. Halim liked the port city, the ships, the sailors' uniforms, and he got the urge to have his photo taken dressed like them. (This is the photo that hangs in the living room to this day.) They went back to Maribor (*the finest place I've ever seen*, Ferdonija says now, and she's seen Istanbul as well). They had the beauties of nature there, a

well-ordered city, civilized people – and they also had a department store, full of clothes and dolls. Oh, if we only had a child, their eyes said to each other's reflection in the store window, and they walked on. One day, just as their stay was coming to an end, Ferdonija started to feel dizzy, had to throw up, hurried to the bathroom. They celebrated her pregnancy with champagne.

Photo 2. Artan. Nine months after their return from Maribor, Artan was born in Gjakova. The house became more joyful just as Kosova, thanks to constitutional reforms, gained substantial autonomy within Yugoslavia. Artan finished primary school and went on to technical school, specializing in electrical engineering. He had black hair and liked being told he looked like Elvis Presley. He started to get work repairing electrical equipment, and then in 1991 he began helping his father in the *Appetite* kebab house, and he continued working there until the NATO bombardment began in 1999. One day he was looking for something in a drawer and he found his high school diploma; as soon as the war was over, he said, he'd sign up to complete his studies. His mother had imagined him coming home a few years after the war brandishing his university certificate. But in December 2005 she received the certificate of identification for him, confirming the cause of his death: brain trauma caused by a bullet.

Photo 3. Armend came into the world one year and a few months after Artan. He was similar to Artan, and both of them resembled Halim, darkly handsome and showing signs of some unknown eastern roots. He went through primary school and high school in the town of his birth. Outside of school he also worked as a tailor. And when he didn't have anything else on his hands he'd help his father and brother in the kebab shop, though he refused to touch the meat. Knowing that his brother hated working with meat, one day Artan grabbed up a handful of it and rubbed it in his brother's face. Armend screamed and went berserk, while Artan hid under a table and couldn't stop laughing. One word from Halim – his presence, his look – was enough to stop the fuss, and Artan apologized and Armend forgave him. He didn't like working in the shop at all, but it was something that had to be done; one must live. He liked watching movies and wanted to study history. He never got to study it, but he did manage to become a part of it.

Photo 4. Ardian. He was born five years after Armend, and four years after they'd moved to a new home. Following primary school, he'd done

three years of high school. He never got to do a fourth. He also worked in the kebab shop. One day he was serving Vuk and Dragan, and just as he put their plates on the table Vuk grabbed his arm. He looked at Vuk, and then at Dragan, uncomprehending. Then they told him to taste the food to show it wasn't poisoned. He did so, unafraid, and they burst out laughing and picked up their spoons and got stuck in to their lunch. Ardian hated the both of them. Whenever he got the chance he'd escape from work and play football. He dreamed of playing in goal in a big stadium, of becoming famous, of appearing for club or country. Now he's one of the disappeared.

Photo 5. Edmond. Her first three sons had been given their names by other people, but Ferdonija got to choose for her fourth because Halim refused to get into a discussion about babies' names. For him it was more important that the baby came out all right, not the name. The house was full of children, and their mother soared with happiness. Everyone complimented her. Even Kasim, who had five daughters and one son. This was Halim and Ferdonija's fourth son; in a patriarchal tradition, this was the summit of satisfaction. (One day Ferdonija's blind brother Dini, like Tiresias of the ancients, appeared at the door to congratulate his sister. From the window of his tailor's shop, Halim saw how Dini sat, how the children gathered round him, and how by touching their shoulders and faces he knew each of them, and could hug them. He saw him talking to his sister, perhaps telling her not to be too proud, but to thank Zeus – sorry, the Deus – for her gifts, without showing off in front of others, especially in front of those to whom God had not been so open-handed. Who can say if that's what Halim was really thinking, as he looked from the window and got ready to come and greet his friend, the man he considered the smartest of his wife's family?) Edmond too followed the same stages of growth: first he was at his mother's breast, and then in her lap, and later she took him by the hand and led him to school. He enjoyed literature; he enjoyed sport more. He went on a karate course, and gained his white belt and his yellow belt. He was four when Kosova's autonomy was rescinded and Milošević came to power. He was fourteen when he fell into the hands of Milošević's regime. Now all that's left of him are his trainers and two essays from school: one bears the title *My Dreams for the Motherland*, the other *Kosova's suffering is my suffering*. The first essay describes his desire to see Kosova liberated, people to be able to work, children to be educated without restrictions, students no longer forced to study in the mosques or at home but to be in

school; he wants them to satisfy the will of the heroes of old, that their land be defended from all its foes, to be educated for the good of their country, to remain determined not to leave Kosova. The word *heritage* seems to have made the greatest impression on him in this report: *Our heroes have passed on to us this heritage… We will confront them, because this is our heritage… We shall never leave Kosova, because she is our heritage*.

In the other essay, written a year later – on the 17th of March 1998, ten days after the massacre of the Jashari family – he's moved on to adopting characters. The title personalizes the general suffering. Then he uses a well-known metonym, referring to a part (the threshold) for the whole (the house, the nation): they're trying to seize our threshold. He goes on to display his sense of style and temperament, the product of his age and what his family has taught him: *we shall not spill our blood in vain… we fight to defend martyred Kosova… We shall defend the motherland until the end of the massacres and the beginning of freedom… Kosova shall be held by the Albanians… if it is necessary, we shall die for Kosova*.

His remains were found in a mass grave at Rogova, in the Has region. Cause of death, according to the certificate of identification: a blow to the head with a sharp instrument. He was buried with due ceremony, together with his big brother, on December 16th 2005, in the Memorial Complex of the Martyrs of the Nation at Çabrat Hill. His torn clothes, the ones he was wearing on the last day, are in his home. The black trainers with the white stripe still show the brand: Adidas. His exercise book is opened whenever his mother misses the sound of his voice, because when she reads the words she hears his pleasant voice, she sees the little mouth, she senses the movement of the pen over the page (*if it is necessary, we shall die for Kosova*) and she presses the book to her breast, as if it were her dearest lamb.

Along with these five photographs, the house-museum is hung with God knows how many others, copies of which can be found throughout Kosova's squares, halls, rooms and offices. They spread like a prolonged pain, from the home to the government building, like the scream of the mythical mother from Mount Sipylus to Mount Olympus.

Although there are all these photos, all over the house, whenever Ferdonija wants to see them in motion she can close her eyes and play the tape of memory. Her tragedy can be felt even if it can't be seen. When her blind brother Dini used to visit her, even though he couldn't see the photos

on the walls he felt the weight of the tragedy and, from under the dark glasses, now and then a tear would glisten.

Every day the video plays again in the mother's memory. An identity paper is missing. Where have you hidden it? Here he is, here's the boy, but he's only little and he hasn't got any ID. Bring it here! The boy is sleeping, dreaming, and his mother's footsteps come near and interrupt his sleep, interrupt his dreams. He himself is his mother's dream, her project. He will grow, he will go to school, he will marry, he will see the world and he will make his mother proud. Edmond, my lambkin, wake up! Up you get! They're calling for you! Friends? No, no. Brothers? No, no. Daddy? No, no. Who then, Mummy? Them, them… the words on her lips are the hardest, but she can see them standing there impatiently, she smiles at them in embarrassment. Them… the militia. Her boy turns pale. He rubs his eyes. He looks at his mother; he looks at the militiamen. He looks at his brothers and his father, under arrest. He gets to his feet. He turns and moves towards them. He joins the ten other arrestees. He's the littlest. No one can believe they'll take him as well. But the militia are all for equality. Adult or child, they're all equal before the militiamen's objective, before their tools. What objective? Elimination. Which tool? The bayonet.

The mother hoped for their mercy.

But why should they show mercy to him? They'd killed babies in their mothers' wombs, they'd carried out Caesareans with bayonets, they'd cut out eyes and ears and noses and heads and hands and legs, they'd roasted hearts and burned bodies, and now you're hoping they'll show mercy to this boy who, compared to all those foetuses, was relatively grown up? No, no, that's your mistake mother, thinking their stone hearts might soften. But you won't realize this until that accursed December of 2005, when you'll hold in your hands the certificate of identification for your son, the one who whenever he goes away always looks back. He didn't know where he was going, and you didn't know if he was coming back. He didn't cry, because he didn't want to upset you. You didn't cry because you didn't want to scare him. So you gazed at each other fiercely, that Saturday which poured a torrent of sadness on your heads.

Just like in a film where, just before some calamity, the character remembers a happy family moment, she felt a few seconds of sunshine – and was then surprised to find herself under overcast skies and soaking wet.

At last she understood that Heaven cannot endure happiness on earth. Jealous Heaven.

I look at the photograph of you, mother of four sons, standing at the side of the frame with your hands clasped together, to your right Armend, Miranda, Arta, Artan and Halim, with Ardian and Edmond sitting in front of the daughters-in-law, everyone smiling, and I think it must be fate taking the photograph. You're all happy, you're all smiling. You gained two daughters-in-law in one day. It's wartime, but mortality and marriage may not be stopped. The six-person family has gained two new members. You look like you're already dreaming of grandsons and granddaughters. You Albanian women, in the eyes of the oppressors you're baby factories. Breeding children has become a national mission: increase the population. They kill them, you make them: they kill one, you make two, they two, you four, they three, you six… until they grow weary of it, until you burn out. Thanatos and Eros declared war on each other. In this photo, you're a warrior of Eros. Thanatos grew jealous of what fate's camera depicted, and a year later he took all of the men shown here; seven years later fate would take the two daughters-in-law. Their first year seemed so full of happiness, but their first anniversary found them widows. They waited, in hope, for another six. If happiness is something physical and suffering metaphysical, the doors of the house ought to be doors of justice. Legends are one thing, reality something else. And thus I see how everyone else in the photo has gone and only you are left, your hands still clasped together. I look closely at you. At first I thought it was a smile, but not anymore. It's a mixture of feelings. You're dressed in black. The colour is better suited to your current situation than to the situation then. *Mourning becomes Ferdonija*. A still photo begins to move. Your clasped hands break their fingers in surprise at fate. How could they all go? How could they leave me alone? What am I supposed to do here, surrounded by fate? It's as if you're asking yourself these questions, while Thanatos triumphs; Eros is overwhelmed. But no; you won't accept defeat. You're all here forever, you say, touching your heart. And when they're in your heart, necessarily they're in your mind. And when they're in the mind and in the heart, they can't count as lost or dead.

I feel that if humans were humane, everything would be different. The three of us could be friends of her sons, we might have dropped by on the off-chance, and when we didn't find the boys in we'd pay our respects to

their mother and we'd go along to the kebab house. We'd eat a burger or a sandwich. Then we'd go to the Old Market, we'd sit in a cafe and we'd chat about the usual stuff, everything from how's the weather's to whether there's a God.

But it seems that God isn't interested in the usual stuff, and so he's woven this tragedy in such a way that our life should be threaded with tension, even in silence. We look one another in the eye, in this quiet house of disquiet, unable to talk of things that might seem normal outside this magical museum, where lives a mother before whom all visitors are diminished.

Her house is full every day, but her heart is empty – empty as the graves of the two sons and the husband who have still not returned.

When she went to Belgrade ten years ago, a Hecuba in the camp of the Greeks seeking her Hector and her Priam, she wouldn't break bread with Achilles and returned empty-handed: empty-handed to the empty graves. The fact that she'd accepted the digging of graves for her three missing seemed to suggest that she accepted the possibility they were among the dead. She hoped they'd return nonetheless, whether alive or dead. It would be enough to have them near her, far from *them*. And if by a miracle one of them should come back alive (*because in the films we used to watch with Armend, one of them always comes back alive*), how's he going to react when he sees his own grave?

Just let him come back; the grave will wait.

The pagan tradition of the cenotaph, the empty grave, has become in the modern era a monument, a memorial, established individually for individuals or one for all. But this mother has chosen to adopt the ancient tradition. Wherever they might have died, we say it's here. The grave is a symbol of the life extinguished. It is the derelict confessional where, during the wake, we go to confess to the departed our love for him.

As in an extant drama of Aeschylus, where the living go to the grave to honour the dead and to communicate with them, from the other side of the fence the director with his movie camera observes the mother – the *prima donna*, Donja – just as the hidden Orestes observed the chorus of mourners:

Forth from the royal halls by high command
I bear libations for the dead.
Rings on my smitten breast my smiting hand,

And all my cheek is rent and red,
Fresh-furrowed by my nails, and all my soul
This many a day doth feed on cries of dole.
And trailing tatters of my vest,
In looped and windowed raggedness forlorn,
Hang rent around my breast,
Even as I, by blows of Fate most stern
Saddened and torn.

An Orestes with a camera, Gazi films Ferdonija so that we too may feel her tragedy; he knows that this is how you kindle catharsis in the spectator, participating in the suffering of the main character, so that *passio* becomes *compassio*.

We watch the tragic mother wandering among the five graves. As in one of the ancient dramas that have come down to us, she must speak; might she, d'you think?

... for I, who pour
Upon the grave these streams funeral,
With what fair word can I invoke my sire?

In the mind of the ancient sufferer there flares a *nemesis*, a curse: *O God grant these criminals their just desserts – grant them a crime*. The mother from Gjakova wipes the white stone of Artan's grave and, weeping, tells him that his wife has re-married. Then she moves on to Armend and tells him that his new bride has re-married too. The two women have now got children as well. She moves to the third grave, then the fourth, the smallest. She tells him that his friends have got married now. In her memory, her son has remained forever small, while his friends have grown and wed.

I've nowt else for to do with life
but keep the front door wide.
My guests, like you wished, they come and go.

Then she gets up and moves to the last grave, the fifth grave, the grave of her husband. She takes out a stool, squats and speaks. What seems a monologue to us is a dialogue for her:

Those words of yours, I made them true…
A worker's not forgot by God! you said.
I said, it isn't you alone who works.
You're not forgot, and nor your boys, nor I.
And now you've a museum for your home.
You always wanted lots of guests
every day, to come and go, and so they do.
I greet and I grin for them, and so
I've always kept your word for you
and whiles I live I'll keep it for you.
We've put a plaque there.
You're not lost, none of you…
You are forever – here.
Forever.
So long as earth and sun shall last
you shall abide.

Gazi is concealed among the graves with his camera, filming, convinced that this documentary of the crime and its aftermath is the best kind of revenge, with the spirits of the missing forming a classical chorus calling for justice.

But she's not Electra. She's Niobe. Those there are her Niobids. *Seated on their tomb she made lament over her dead children.* And so the lost Niobe of Aeschylus is found, at last, in Gjakova. She speaks with graves that are inhabited; she speaks with graves that are empty. The empty graves fill her heart with the hope that, one day, who knows? … miracles do happen… like in the films she watched with her son, who now is… is not.

I'd seen that scene in Gazi's film several times. The scene for which Dritan wrote his *Monologue on this Side of the Grave*.

Now Gazi and Dritan are making their farewells. I get up too. I'm convinced that it's the quietest house I've ever experienced. Once it was the noisiest house in the district.

Fifteen years ago I wrote my thesis on catharsis in classical tragedy, but I've needed to acquaint myself with this modern tragedy, in order to understand at last what I was talking about – at the same time as two dead sons were returning to this mother.

I'm a spectator, walking out of a theatre of tragedy, freshly purified by fear and mercy. Strangely, I didn't identify with the protagonist; but I saw my own mother in her place. I imagined her alone at home. (At one point we too were five men.) I wonder what my mother would do if the remaining three of us weren't there. She'd have no daughters. But there are templates. She'd just have to choose: to burn herself like Pashka, or to suffer for the rest of her life like Ferdonija.

When we shook hands in farewell, it felt like my mother's hand.

Something she said sticks in my mind: *I made the lads' jumpers a bit longer, so they wouldn't catch a chill in their innards*. My mother always used to worry about the same thing: sitting at the sewing machine, she'd shout at me to keep my innards covered as I went. No sooner had the car door shut than I felt the seat touching my bare back; my innards were in peril. Clumsy in the enclosed space, I sat up straighter and tucked my t-shirt into my trousers. As we drove away I was looking at Ferdonija, as if I were her son and she were my mother.

In my mind's eye I can see a photo of her sewing. For twenty years now she's been weaving a cloth of anticipation, like Penelope, eyes fixed on the thread. Odysseus does not appear; perhaps he continues to wander the realm of shadows. Telemachus, or rather the Telemachuses, are with their father – perhaps seeking their mother. They were all *tele-machs*, far from the war; and yet the war took them.

I tell myself that these last twenty years we've talked so much about the war, about battles, about heroism in Kosova that no one believes any of it anymore. The fictional *Iliad* has overshadowed the real *Niobiad*. Vain heroism has silenced the pain of tragedy, and has stopped us seeing the war as it really was: a little epic and utterly tragic. Only those who are gone, the graves and the grief.

I ought to light a candle in each place I did wrong, said Zoran *the jackal* seven years ago, in an interview of regret and denunciation; at the age of nineteen a lightbulb had burned out in his head. He knows that apology won't bring the dead back, and he's realized that the war has left peace gravely wounded, and the two sides are obliged not to let it die.

These days the only thing the two sides can do to build the bridge of peace is to denounce the war crimes, not so much for the sake of those who suffered them, as for those who live among the killers and don't realize a thing. Today the unpunished criminals are like psychopaths within normal

society. They live among family members, neighbours, friends, and children, none of whom knows their past. And if by chance one day someone happens to touch a nerve, they don't hesitate to let out the *tiger*, the *jackal* or the *eagle* that lurks within them. So denunciation opens the way to punishment and protects peace, the cause to which Gazi dedicated his film about the Kosovan mother who one spring day lost everything; one spring day they shrivelled her saplings and burned her dreams, and still she strives to revive them from the embers of memory.

Dritan, Gazi and I drive away into the April afternoon. Donja is behind us, with her flowers. Lilies come to life in April. Memories come to life. But do the dead come to life?

As we travel along the road named for the conciliator of feuding Albanians, I ask myself: could there ever be a conciliator to reconcile two hostile nations? Through the window, I see Donja in her yard and I say to myself: now that we've gone, what will she do?

Should she stay in and watch a film?

No, she used to watch them with Armend.

Should she go to the holiday resort at Deçan?

No, she used to go there with the children.

Should she go to Landovica?

No, she used to go there with her husband.

Should she go to Ulqin?

No, she used to go there with her husband and the children.

Should she stay in the yard and water the flowers?

Yes. And, together with them, her memories.

She used to go out, walk, chat, laugh, until one day it was Saturday and the door closed on her, to let her out no more. The day that stopped. The accursed day. The Saturday. That terrible Saturday. That eternal Saturday.

The days pass and repeat; only Saturday stays the same. It never passes. It stopped twenty years ago. You can visit Ferdonija's home during the week, but as soon as you enter you're in her Saturday. One day of hers is stronger than all of your days. She swallows the other days, transforms them into one, one black Saturday.

Sitting there, listening to her story, looking at her photographs, you feel as if you're slowly being transformed inside. Like the Niobe of myth, who felt her whole organism stiffening within until she was entirely turned to stone, looking at her you feel yourself unstiffening, weakening, crumbling

inwardly. Our Niobe is a rock before which we weep. Struck by fate, turned into a heroine, she is the strength that we lack. With her suffering and her endurance she stands higher than us, like all tragic heroines.

No, *they* shall not die as long as she lives. And when she is no longer here, *they* shall be, because she's taken care of this too – putting up the memorial plaque and turning the house into the museum. *We've put up a plaque. You're not lost, none of you.… You are forever – here. Forever. So long as earth and sun shall last you shall abide.*

And so, day by day, year by year, all other inclinations dwindle and there remains but one: waiting. All other dreams have disintegrated, and there remains but one: return. All the other members of the family have disappeared and there remains but one: mother. All the other days drop away and there remains but one: Saturday.

Twenty years of Saturday. Saturday unending.

Unlike the Saturday of the ancients which was linked to planting, her Saturday is linked to harvesting. This is the Saturday of Saturn, who has eaten her sons and her husband. The Saturday of a mythical monster that has digested her happiness and turned her into myth.

I take the notepad from my pocket and I write: tragic myths are created by great shocks. In the direst cases, we are myths recycled. Once upon a time abstract paradigms were established; and today we see them taking concrete form.

One day all our eyes shall be closed: I who am writing this, you who are reading it, that mother suffering within the walls of her museum and the killers of her sons and of her husband, the killers who live freely because over time they've got rid of conscience as through indifferent intestines. They'll all die, those who are untroubled by anything and those who are troubled by everything. Everyone, without exception. Everything must come to an end. It shall crumble into dust. And the dust shall be carried away on the winds.

Yet, across the ocean – across time – wise Elie Wiesel uttered words of fire to make us see that if we remain indifferent, we are dead even while we live.

Pashka set fire to herself because of indifference. Hers were the best of sons, and she wanted to tell the world this. The enemy had taken them, had killed them, just like all the rest, *no different*. They threw them in a sack just like all the rest, *no different*. The soldiers buried them just like all the rest,

no different. This failure to distinguish, so *indifferent*, was more than she could bear. Her sons, she believed, were the best; they'd been different while they were alive, and different they should be now they were dead. She bore her grudge not only against the indifferent world that had treated everyone alike; she felt it even more strongly against God. How could he possibly have remained indifferent to her prayers and to the crimes against her boys? Before she died, something inside her had died. Already for her, it wasn't a heaven up there but a shroud. And so that morning she walked up the road and sat by a bush and set herself on fire. Had there been a Moses in the mountains thereabouts, he'd have seen a burning bush. A bush burning the God within her, like a lover who kills her beloved because she can't endure her own jealousy or his indifference.

Thus Pashka burned herself and burned death. The great stone set there in her memory will one day crumble; it will one day be forgotten. But her deed shall live on as long as that indifferent heaven remains above. And as long as she is remembered, her two sons shall also be remembered. She set herself on fire to wrench them out of forgetting, out of indistinction, out of the anonymity of the victims. There was a little egoism in the deed, a little narcissism, a little altruism, a little fanaticism, a little humanism, a little barbarism. Her fire is an echo of the call of the wild. She speaks not with words but with flames. She doesn't want to moralize, so she lets the fire speak for her, the fire that springs from her burned heart. The fire demands attention for burned hearts.

By burning herself, Pashka saved Ferdonija too. She showed that mothers who await the return of their sons and daughters can run out of patience, and so we shouldn't take our eyes off them. Two years later, Ferdonija too buried two sons. But there was that message from Pashka, insisting that we take care of Donja, that even though we can't avoid pain there needn't be another suicide. The first woman, of the fire, saved the second woman, of the stone. Away with the flame, for hope still flickers! And if one day the other sons return in the same form, there will still be hope: hope that they're happy in heaven and unforgotten on earth.

The names of the two women hint at their fates. Pashka passed over her yard, the fields, the graves and the road and rose from the temporal to the eternal. And Ferdonija remains – as in the Turkish root of her name, *ferdane* – alone and unique.

Pashka and Ferdonija, two pains of the same tragedy. They remain like the credits of a film made at the end of the last century. One stopped forever in a meadow, between graves and home. One stops at home and has been stopped there these twenty years. One stopped on her Tuesday, the other on her Saturday. And how can these mothers move forwards, when the future is behind them?

When we reach Fushë Kosova, Dritan falls silent; he's gone on at length about the need for the denazification of Serbia – that's to say the distancing, or *differentiation* of normal citizens from criminal citizens – and how essential it is for the international community to recognize which was the guilty party. Gazi starts to tell us about a new documentary, on women who were raped in the war, and by the side of the road I see a girl and a boy, perhaps fourteen years old, bags on their backs. I close my eyes and I see the ones who died at that age: Klaudia, pursued by the soldiers in black, runs to seek safety in the house of the Lord, while Edmond, rubbing his eyes, walks out of his home towards the soldiers with their black masks. The white petals in the meadow burn red with the blood of the girl who falls among the flowers like a felled sapling. The eyes of the departing boy plead with the eyes of his mother, frozen on her feet like a rock.

When we get back to Mother Teresa Cathedral, from where we set off this morning, the snow on the pavement has melted. But other, larger flakes are falling: the indifferent flakes of a *forgetful snow.*

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A.A.

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Ag Apolloni is one of the most significant and distinctive Albanian-language writers of his generation, admired for his contemporary yet elegant prose and for the rich diversity of references that inform it. He has published three other novels: The Howl of the Wolf, Zazen, and Red Riding Hood – a fairytale for grown-ups, as well as plays, poetry, and criticism. His works have been translated into various languages and won many prizes. Glimmer of Hope, Glimmer of Flame was declared Kosovo's Novel of the Year 2020.

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